



The Power of Uniqueness: A Fireside Chat With Duy-Loan Le

There's a certain magic that happens when you sit down at a table and have the opportunity to genuinely listen to the stories, advice, and knowledge that those around you have to offer. As we begin to put 2020 behind us, it felt like IEEE Power Electronics Society (PELS) members could use a bit more of this experience in the coming years. A new event series called 'Power at the Table', hosted by the Women in Engineering (WIE) committee, kicked-off in April (Figure 1). This series is designed to celebrate the stories and voices of people changing the face of technology. PELS offers an abundance of resources to help develop its members' technical acumen, so this series is focused on helping members define success within their careers, in whatever way it feels authentically aligned with their own personal goals.

To set the tone of this new event series, the first esteemed speaker was Duy-Loan Le (Figure 2). Duy-Loan has a larger than life personality with a sharp wit, infectious enthusiasm, and a passion for both learning and service that shines through in her stories. At just 12 years old, Duy-Loan immigrated to the United States as a refugee from Vietnam, unable to speak English, with only her family and the



FIG 1 IEEE PELS WIE kicks off a new series called 'Power at the Table' to celebrate the stories of people changing the face of technology.



FIG 2 Duy-Loan Le.

clothes on her back. Duy-Loan went on to excel in her education with a Bachelor's of Electrical Engineering degree from the University of Texas in Austin, Texas, and later pursued her MBA from the University of Houston,

Texas, while working at Texas Instruments (TI). Duy-Loan started her career at TI at 19 and two decades later became the first Asian American and only female to be elected to the highest title of Senior Fellow. During her 35-year career at TI, Duy-Loan led the growth of TI's memory product line across five countries and three continents to generate multi-billion dollar revenue, oversaw the development of the world's fastest DSP according to Guinness World Records, and pioneered products enabling TI's entry into the base station and VoIP markets. Duy-Loan holds 24 patents and currently serves on the board of directors at National Instruments, Ballard Power Systems, Atomera, various start-up companies, and Cree Wolf-speed. She is an active philanthropist for the power of education, including board memberships for both of her Alma maters, the Sunflower Mission, and the Mona Foundation. Duy-Loan has two adult sons, who were raised

by her and her husband as proud diversity advocates.

During her career, Duy-Loan experienced being 'the only' many times, an experience commonly felt by members of under-represented populations. Throughout her career, she often faced being the only female in the room, the only Vietnamese-American, the only immigrant and certainly the list could go on. While some people can find the experience of being 'the only' as intimidating or discouraging, Duy-Loan encourages us to reframe this experience and learn to harness the power of uniqueness with a resilient attitude. "I think of the word 'the only' a little bit differently. Do you know how many people would be willing to pay for the painting Mona Lisa? It is rare, it is unique, and it is precious. So, being the only is not a disadvantage, it actually can be an advantage. Think about that the next time you're in an 'only' situation—think of yourself as that Mona Lisa painting."

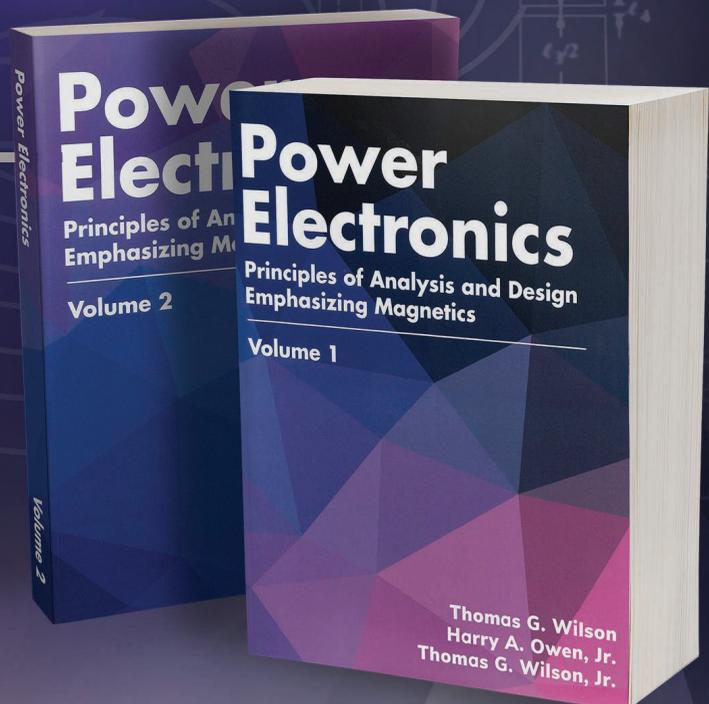
The experience of being 'the only' has offered Duy-Loan the opportunity to cultivate her tenets of leadership: gratitude, hard work, perspective and approachability. "I listen to people from where they are talking, not from where I'm talking. I don't judge people through the field of lenses that I've lived through, but through the difficulties that they've been faced with." A key part of being able to maintain perspective in any situation is to learn how to actively listen. Being an innovator at TI and working in new product development allowed Duy-Loan the opportunity to work on advanced technology, which was often ahead of its time. Sometimes a great technical idea would meet a roadblock when it came to implementation in the operational side of the business—rather than being discouraged in these times, she focused on understanding why a decision was made so that she could use this knowledge to fuel her future strategic

decisions. Working with and learning from people from all over the world, in different situations, since her pre-teen years as an enterprising street vendor, has informed her leadership style and enabled her to learn from everyone around her.

During her induction as a Technical Fellow at TI her husband was mistaken as the honoree, rather than her. Duy-Loan utilizes this example to emphasize that as people go through life, they collect experiences which shape their thought processes. From these patterns of experience, people will naturally draw conclusions and being the one to 'break the mold' of people's expectations can lead to genuine mistakes. During these times, it's helpful to cultivate a sense of grace and humor—"You just have to laugh at the situation, don't take it personally. I would not have survived more than three decades of insanity at TI if I didn't have my sense of humor. Learn to laugh at life, take things light-hearted."

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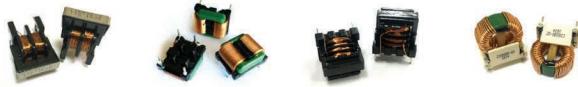
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It's easy to assume that a former Senior Technical Fellow at a major technical behemoth and current board of directors member would be unflappable in any occasion. However, Duy-Loan admits that she still gets nervous before major speaking engagements. "Confidence is something that you never have completely, but you get better at; new situations will still test your confidence." Everyone has fears, but Duy-Loan recommends "practice, practice, practice" to help you overcome them.

Often in interviews with executive women, the question of work-life balance will arise and there are a number of diverse approaches for how people accommodate this delicate balance. Turning away from the traditional view of segmentation between our work or home lives, Duy-Loan instead prefers to view them as synergistic and self-describes this approach to life as being a 'salad'. Each unique experience that you have brings a new type of expertise, which when mixed make you a more effective and unique leader. As a refugee growing up, she found herself mixing cultures and learning to respect the value of each in her life. As a working mother, she took the opportunity to bring her children to keynote speeches and teach them hands-on social confidence. As a technical leader, she leveraged the experiences from her philanthropic and home life to make her a better manager. When we separate our lives into discrete categories and attempt to differentiate between them, we segregate our energy and can diminish our ability to succeed within each. While this integrated approach made her a better leader in each of her 'three lives', she also admits that it's not always an easy task to balance all of your responsibilities. On those days, she reminds herself that there is nothing to fear when you're doing the best you can. Also, don't be afraid to lean on and ask for help from your support system when pressures are high. Prioritizing where and when you invest your energy is a key factor of success when juggling many responsibilities. "Learn the courage to say no, but with a yes at the same time." For example, if someone comes to you with a request and you are unable to help them at that time or are not the best person for the job—consider a 'No And' approach. 'I can't help you with that but here's someone who can' or 'I can't help you at this moment, do you think we have seven days for me to come back and help you with that?'

One of Duy-Loan's great gifts is her ability to set the tone for those around her; in an instant, she can put you at ease with comfortable conversation and her vibrant laugh. Duy-Loan emphasizes the importance of understanding and connecting with people as a key facet of her leadership style. Learning to judge people's capacity—what they're best at and what items are not the best fit for their strengths—allows

you to allocate resources effectively, achieve your collective goals, and reduce overwhelming yourself and the team. While engineers may be tempted to focus purely on technical development, Duy-Loan attributes interpersonal relationships as one of the driving reasons for her technical elevation at TI. “[Senior management] saw me as different, both the technical competency plus caring about people is what allowed me to make Senior Fellow at TI... When the motivation is great than yourself, the power is greater than you can imagine.” As a leader, prioritizing people means ensuring that you are both approachable and making time for sincere connection.

To borrow the words of the Dean at UT Austin who nominated Duy-Loan to her first public board seat, she is: Fearless. Engaging. An Excellent Listener. Articulate. “Learning is a lifetime process; when we stop learning, we stop living... [Remember that]

your name and your brand is like your integrity—it takes years to build and can easily be thrown away. Always think about that. Executing excellence will build your brand.” Putting Duy-Loan’s brand into a few key takeaways is a difficult task, but the themes I take away from her experience are:

- Everyone around you has something important to contribute—invest in seeing this and be grateful every day.
- Execute excellence, always.
- Find joy and humor as much as you can.

Now the question is—what are *you* learning today?

*The full fireside chat with Duy-Loan Le is available for streaming on IEEE TV; please excuse the audio echo in the first 10 minutes of the recording. To learn more about future **Power at the Table** events or to get involved with the PELS Women in Engineering committee, email PELSWiE@IEEE.org.*

About the Author

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