

# LEADERSHIP: Not Such a Leap



By Katy O'Grady



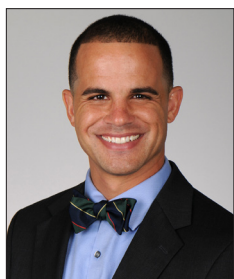
Leadership takes many forms—and they're all accessible to early-career PTs and PTAs.

Leadership isn't just for the self-confident and those who already are established in their careers. Leadership opportunities take many forms, and early-career physical therapists (PTs) and physical therapist assistants (PTAs) can take advantage of all of them.

Being a leader in one's profession isn't limited to accepting committee assignments or taking on elected roles. "You're a leader to your patients," notes Matt Gratton, PTA, a member of APTA's Early Career Team Task Force who works at Lutheran Hospital in Fort Wayne, Indiana. "You're a leader within your organization just by being there on time, being passionate with your patients, and having a positive attitude."



Matt Gratton, PTA



Aaron Embry, PT, DPT, MSCR

Aaron Embry, PT, DPT, MSCR, debunks the notion that leadership requires special abilities or resume points. Although he is president of the South Carolina Physical Therapy Association and a research associate at the Center for Rehabilitation Research at the Medical University of South Carolina, he insists that there is nothing inherently special in any

of that. "What is most important," he says, "is that I show up, pay attention, and hustle—that I work hard. If you do all of the basic, common-sense things—be inquisitive, care, and be there for patients, clients, and colleagues—you'll be amazed at how much will happen to develop you into someone who can lead people."

Leadership involves consistently taking on challenges, Embry says. "Do I face challenges with integrity, honesty, and bravery," he asks himself, "and acknowledge that I might succeed, but also that I might fail? What do I learn from my missteps to ensure that they're not true failures?" He finds, he says, that dealing with each new challenge helps him better tackle the next one.



Fred Gilbert, PT, DPT

Assuming leadership roles within APTA opened doors for Fred Gilbert, PT, DPT, helping him land his current position at Focus Physiotherapy in Huntsville, Alabama. He served as president of APTA's Student Assembly in 2014-2015 and is a member of the APTA Early Career Team Task Force. When he applied for the job

at Focus, his employers said his leadership connections enhanced his value to the practice.

Early-career leadership is vital for the profession itself at this changing time in health care, says Jennifer Green-Wilson, PT, EdD, MBA. "We have to put leadership in the mix in order to advance practice and enhance our value," she says.

"Health care is transforming. We've got to be part of that change process, and leadership is all about influencing change." Green-Wilson, a principal and consultant with the Institute for Business Literacy & Leadership, formerly directed the LAMP (Leadership, Administration, Management, and Professionalism) Institute within HPA: The Catalyst (APTA's Health Policy and Administration Section).

Gratton's role as a voice to his fellow PTAs—especially those, like him, who came into the physical therapy profession later in their working career—is a big motivator, he says. Many PTAs "don't think their involvement matters, or don't even know where they can be involved," he notes. "But our voice is extremely important. You need to have a PTA in there saying 'That works great for that particular PT, but it doesn't necessarily apply to PTAs and where they exist professionally and financially.'"



Jennifer Green-Wilson, PT, EdD, MBA

## Transitioning to Leadership

Graduation from school offers PTs and PTAs opportunities to self-reflect, connect, and grow. Although she'd been a student leader, Rebecca Ditwiler, PT, DPT, saw her commitment to leadership increase when she moved to Florida after graduation and sought ways to connect with her PT peers there. Ditwiler, a board-certified clinical specialist in orthopaedic physical therapy, is an assistant professor of physical therapy and rehabilitation sciences at the University of South Florida, an active clinician, and the Florida Physical Therapy Association's West Central District's regional director.

"Talk about being in the right place at the right time," Detwiler says. "I just happened to be at a district meeting, and they needed someone on the nominating committee." She stepped up. The state chapter then sponsored her for LAMP training. That, in turn, led her to develop a more-focused leadership plan than simply "being there and saying yes," she says.

"Yes" definitely is the default response for Gilbert, however. He describes his approach as "don't say no to any opportunities."



Rebecca Ditwiler, PT, DPT

Conceding that this can be difficult for busy early-career PTs and PTAs, he nevertheless preaches “embracing the discomfort.” With time, he has become more selective about his commitments. Still, he recommends surrounding oneself with people who present opportunities for growth.

“I wouldn’t be where I am in my career today if I hadn’t just said yes to some of those early things people asked me to do,” Ditwiler says. “It may seem like a lot to take on at the time, but it’s definitely valuable to follow through.” She has found great benefit, she says, from the nationwide connections she’s made through LAMP participation and association involvement.

## The LAMP Light

LAMP ([www.aptahpa.org/page/LAMP](http://www.aptahpa.org/page/LAMP)) offers leadership training to PTs, PTAs, and students through in-depth mentoring, leadership tools, and structured self-assessment of participants’ strengths and weaknesses. “Through our relationships within the profession, we can lead change, inspire the future, and rally effective teamwork,” Green-Wilson says. LAMP adds foundational knowledge that’s important to leadership. “Even if we don’t have the title of ‘leader,’ we should be modeling these behaviors, because leadership is about that behavior and those relationships,” Green-Wilson says.


LAMP 101 and 201 courses are offered annually at APTA’s Combined Sections Meeting. LAMP training uses *The Leadership Challenge* by James Kouzes and Barry Posner, which outlines 5 practices of exemplary

leadership: model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart.

“Model the way” relates to self-awareness, especially regarding level of interaction, credibility, honesty, and ability to engage. “Inspire a shared vision” addresses motivating and working collaboratively with patients. “Challenge the process” relates to change and advancing practice. “Enable others to act” involves empowering patients. “Encourage the heart” means connecting with 1 person at a time, “which we do really well as PTs and PTAs,” Green-Wilson observes.

LAMP participants engage in extensive self-assessment and create personal mission statements. Gilbert describes it as identifying, “Here’s what I value most, and want everyone to understand.” For him, constant challenge and intentional discomfort are central. But other individuals’ mission statements take different tacks, such as focusing primarily on patient care or the practitioner’s life balance. The mission statement “gives us a sense of purpose and clarity around our values, passions, and strengths,” Green-Wilson says. “It helps guide decision-making and keeps you focused on the things that are important to you.” She recommends Stephen R. Covey’s *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* as a resource for developing a personal mission statement.

Embry found the self-assessment process worthwhile but painful. “I figured, ‘How difficult can it be?’ he recalls. “I told myself, ‘I’ll learn something, maybe meet some



“Through our relationships within the profession, we can lead change, inspire the future, and rally effective teamwork” —Jennifer Green-Wilson, PT, EdD, MBA



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new people, and hopefully develop some quality that I can bring back to the chapter.” But he found himself confronting unexpected and difficult aspects of his personal and professional life. “It made me step back and look at who I really am, what I was doing, and how that affected the way I was leading myself and might lead others,” Embry says.

Gilbert’s work on his mission statement and personality evaluation gave him particular insights into communication styles, he says. “There are so many times—in the clinical setting and in leadership meetings—when people are saying the same thing, but they’re saying it differently, so it sounds like a disagreement,” he notes. “Understanding how to step back and open those lines of communication is very helpful.”

## Mentors Matter

In the LAMP course, developing a personal mission statement leads into working with a mentor and crafting a leadership plan with measurable goals. Such measurement can be challenging when goals relate to emotional or relationship skills, but many leadership planning tools are available online. Ditwiler also notes that PTs who are recent graduates may have done some self-analysis and planning in their DPT programs.

To help measure progress on Ditwiler’s goal of learning how to lead a group, her mentor suggested she survey participants in a session that she’d led. “It was very eye-opening, because I didn’t get the most positive feedback,” she says. “I learned what that felt like. I think it made me a stronger person and a better leader.”

Those who progress through the training are assigned to be LAMP mentors themselves. Embry managed LAMP mentor/mentee pairing and development for a few years. “One of the most fascinating and difficult things,” he says, “is attempting to successfully pair individuals who have widely divergent backgrounds—such as number of years in practice, different communication skills, different practice settings, and varied experiences in leadership engagement.”

Issues related to his age and background have driven Gratton’s commitment to leadership. From his previous 10-year career as a high school band teacher, Gratton learned to work with and benefit from those with different levels of skill and experience. In a physical therapy setting, this may mean that early-career PTs are working side-by-side with PTAs who have been in their job for 30 years or with veteran PTs who entered the profession with a bachelor’s degree. “It’s important to respect those differences, learn from them, and draw from those people,” Gratton says. “I learn as much from the older PTAs with whom I work as I do from the PTs. If you’ve been at your job for 30 years, you’ve seen a ton of things,” he notes. “I want to learn as much as I

can from you.”

## Seize Opportunities

Moving into leadership with the state or national organization, or even within a practice, requires identifying one’s passion and making it known.

When Gilbert ran for president of APTA’s Student Assembly, he had no previous association experience. Still, he felt he could contribute. “If it interests you, even if it seems like you’re shooting for the moon, just put your name in the hat,” he advises. “The worst that can happen is that people will see that you want to get involved, and they’ll find something else for you to do.” Running for an elected position enhances others’ familiarity with you, Gilbert notes—and that can increase your likelihood of being selected for the next opportunity.

“What are you passionate about?” is Gratton’s response when PTs and PTAs ask him how to get involved. Once they know their passion, they can determine which APTA section relates most closely to that area and look for ways to get involved. “Start small, be focused, and try to make a difference,” Gratton says. Sometimes, he adds, simply asking the question is the crucial step. “If I’m with the section and you’re asking me, ‘How can I get involved?’ I know that you’re interested and that it’s up to us in the section to find your best fit.”

Associations need a steady inflow of new energy, so some state chapters have developed specific programs to engage new professionals and give them opportunities to connect. Ditwiler and other chapter leaders in Florida saw how those who got involved as students often dropped away after graduation. They responded by creating special interest groups for students and early-career professionals and by including group representatives in core chapter activities such as strategic planning.

“There isn’t anything magical about being a leader or leadership,” Embry sums up. Rather, it’s driven by a desire to learn more and make a difference, and it requires willingness to accept both successes and failures. “Leadership really is just about developing yourself and those around you,” she says. ■