

## Smarts, Heart, And Courage

An Interview with Lisa Lutoff-Perlo, Vice Chairman, External Affairs, Royal Caribbean Group

**EDITORS' NOTE** Lisa Lutoff-Perlo, Vice Chairman of External Affairs at Royal Caribbean Group, is a high impact leader in the travel and hospitality industry whose vision and strategy not only propelled Celebrity Cruises to achieve transformational financial results as a brand within the Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd. (RCL) portfolio, but also dramatically increased the number of women in leadership roles throughout the Celebrity brand. Her passion for building extraordinary ships, creating unique experiences, and opening up the world through travel has brought recognition and countless awards to her and Celebrity Cruises. Lutoff-Perlo and Celebrity have achieved global impact, earning her a reputation as a trailblazer bringing transformation, diversity and inclusion into the travel and hospitality industry and onto the bridges of ships. Lutoff-Perlo is a member of the Board of Directors of Fortune 500 company AutoNation, actively lending her expertise to numerous nonprofit boards. She shares her powerful career stories and lessons learned in her leadership book, *Making Waves: A Woman's Rise to the Top Using Smarts, Heart, and Courage*, available in February 2024.



Lisa Lutoff-Perlo

**COMPANY BRIEF** Royal Caribbean Group ([royalcaribbeangroup.com](http://royalcaribbeangroup.com)) is one of the leading cruise companies in the world with a global fleet of 64 ships traveling to approximately 1,000 destinations around the world. Royal Caribbean Group is the owner and operator of three award winning cruise brands: Royal Caribbean International, Celebrity Cruises, and Silversea Cruises, and it is also a 50 percent owner of a joint venture that operates TUI Cruises and Hapag-Lloyd Cruises. Together, the brands have an additional 10 ships on order as of September 30, 2023.

### Will you discuss your career journey?

My career journey was quite interesting and unexpected. I began in an entry level field sales position in 1985 and ended up being appointed to President & CEO of Celebrity in late 2014 and held that position until 2023, when I decided after 39 years that it was time to write a new chapter in my life and career. I was appointed as the first woman to ever hold three different

positions in our company, and I navigated different areas in the company ranging from Sales, Marketing, Operations, and then the C-suite. I learned many lessons along my way that helped me achieve all that I did throughout my career. The experiences I had were a key reason why I was ready and selected for the CEO of Celebrity and I believe being open to learning, trying new things, gaining new experiences, and not following a linear path can work for others, just like it did for me.

### What were the keys to your ability to shatter the glass ceiling in a traditionally male-dominated industry?

I never let my gender stand in my way and I never thought of it as a barrier to what I wanted to accomplish. Neither did the men who I worked with who promoted me into the positions I held in my career at our company. That said, there were times that my gender was a factor when I was appointed to certain roles that no other woman had held or even been part of the executive leadership teams that I joined. A key to my ability to shatter the glass ceiling, to be successful and keep moving up the ladder, was that I knew that I needed to establish credibility among the skeptics and prove each day with every interaction that there was a reason I was chosen for my position – and I let being a great leader be the one thing that resonated with everyone, regardless of role or gender. I also learned to ask for help from those I was leading, admit I didn't know as much

as they did about their jobs, and show them the respect they deserved for all they have done and accomplished as well. I made my gender a non-issue any time it was one. And the other thing that enabled me to continue to achieve what I did in a male-dominated industry is that I was successful, driven, got results, and learned the business inside out.

### How did you lead Celebrity Cruises through the tumultuous uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic?

None of us ever imagined that our industry and business could be completely shut down for 15 months, but it was and I learned my most valuable leadership lessons during that time. I learned that I needed to pivot my style in a profound way. I needed to go from being a leader primarily focused on driving our results and achieving our Key Performance Indicators, to being a leader that filled people with hope, optimism, encouragement, and confidence that we would be back – and to stay with us until we did. I needed to put everyone else first when I realized how much people were counting on me to make them believe that everything was going to be OK, even if I didn't always believe that myself. I learned that leaders need to pivot – sometimes dramatically. And if you can't – well, you aren't a great leader.

### What interested you in writing the book, *Making Waves: A Woman's Rise to the Top Using Smarts, Heart, and Courage*, and what are the key messages you wanted to convey in the book?

Just like becoming President & CEO of Celebrity Cruises, I never thought I would end

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# MAKING WAVES

A Woman's Rise to the Top  
Using Smarts, Heart, and Courage

Lisa Lutoff-Perlo

Vice Chairman, External Affairs, Royal Caribbean Group

with Sarah McArthur



up being an author. It never crossed my mind. The reason I ended up writing *Making Waves* is because so many times during my tenure in the role and as I told my story, talked to other women (and men), accomplished all I did for Celebrity and the industry, I kept hearing over and over again, “You need to write a book.” Finally, after my team spent some time telling me all the reasons why I really did need to write a book, I decided to do it and here’s why. I believe that if I could do it, anyone can. I learned so many things throughout my career that helped me be successful and accomplish things I never thought possible. I wanted to share those learnings to help others as they are navigating their own journeys and lives.

**What do you feel are the keys to effective leadership?**

I summed those up in the subtitle of *Making Waves*. To be a great leader and accomplish great things you need three things. First,

smarts – without intelligence you can’t make it into these types of roles. And being smart sometimes just means surrounding yourself with smart people who fill in your gaps and know more than you do. I made that a practice. Some leaders think that shows weakness. Not me. I believe hiring smart people shows strength. The second thing is heart. We have to lead with heart. It truly matters. When people who work with you and for you know that you genuinely care about them, they will genuinely care back. And when they do, the discretionary effort you will get is priceless. Many high-level leaders just don’t understand or value heart enough. And, lastly, but probably most important, is courage. Leadership takes courage. Accomplishing great things means taking risks, which takes courage. Picking yourself up after a failure takes courage. Being a great leader takes courage above all else.

**How do you describe your management style?**

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My style is fair, but I have always held others and myself highly accountable. I empower people to do their jobs and don’t micromanage them. I guide them and push them to do better and be better than they ever thought they could be. And I do it while letting them know I care deeply about them and their success.

**Do you feel that there are strong opportunities for women to lead in the industry?**

Yes, I do. Women have come a long, long way in our industry – especially over the last 10 years. Many women are leading cruise brands. At Celebrity we increased the percentage of women on our bridges from 3 percent to 33 percent – and the average in the maritime industry is 2 percent. Women hold many more leadership roles on the operational side of our business ship and shore. As I said when I was appointed to my position as President & CEO of Celebrity, “I might be the first, but I don’t want to be the last.” I worked to ensure that I was successful so that I could pave the way for many other women who would come after me.

**With all that you accomplished in your career, were you able to enjoy the process and take moments to celebrate the wins?**

I got better at that over time. Based on how I am wired, I am oftentimes thinking about what else there is to do and accomplish, but I learned, based on a lot of feedback and experience, that it is really, really important to stop and celebrate all the wins along the way. That’s important for me or any leader, but it’s even more important for our teams. I have had so many wins and so many great and memorable experiences throughout my career. Over time, I enjoyed the process and celebrated the wins every chance I got. ●