



Book Reviews

Success Strategies from Women in STEM: A Portable Mentor, Second Edition

Peggy A. Pritchard and Christine S. Grant (Editors)
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Arguably this book could be considered a handbook for success in modern times. In case you mis-read the title, the myriad of success strategies contained within are not exclusively ‘for women’ in STEM, rather ‘from women’ in STEM. Thus any of us would benefit from some of the wide-ranging subjects covered in the book. While it is not the sort of book that one would sit and read from cover to cover, it is a very useful manual for life, for people of either gender in STEM.

Many STEM professionals would find a number of the chapters useful, such as the chapters on Networking, Communicating Science and a newly included chapter on using social media strategically. Equally relevant are more traditional chapters on Mentoring, Negotiation and Leadership.

Each chapter within the book stands on its own and can be returned to at any time when the situation calls, like a reference manual for life. Supported by a comprehensive index, one need not read the book from cover to cover as topics can be found easily. However, I found reading the electronic version was frustrating. I would have preferred to turn the pages, dog-ear the corners and take copious notes in the margins, like any diligent scientist.



There are a number of sections targeted somewhat more toward women, for example Chapter 6 ‘Personal Style’. I was surprised to find a reference to a 1997 book (*The New Professional Image*, Bixler and Nix-Rice, 1997) suggesting that if one has an imperfect body, jeans rarely look attractive or professional. This will come as a surprise to many of the people in my department! (Thankfully there was no condemnation of socks with sandals.) The premise of the chapter, however, is that what you wear and how you dress are important, particularly when meeting people for the first time, and this of course is relevant to both genders. Dressing for success sets the tone whereby your functional style (what you do and say) can be heard.

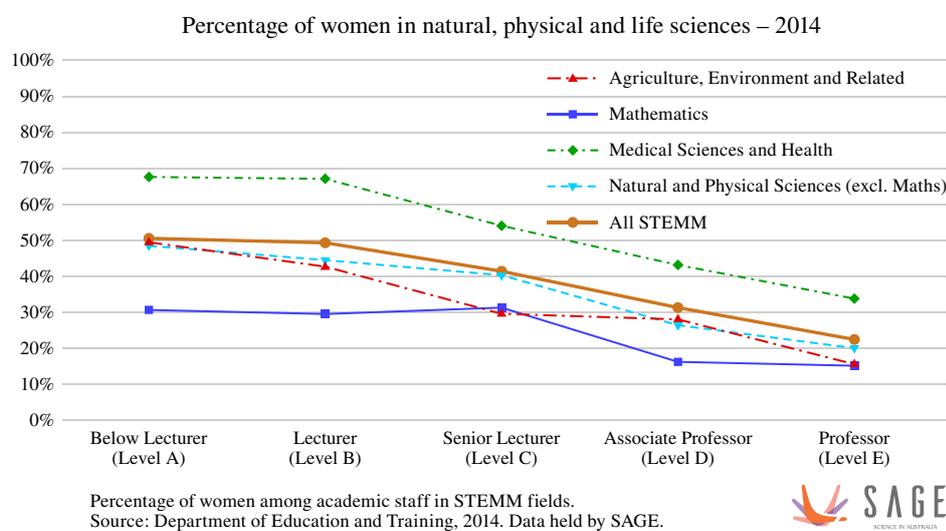
Throughout the book the authors use a range of inspirational or personal quotes from the likes of Mark Twain and the Buddha to much effect. They highlight their points with personal anecdotes and a range of stories. More than 350 women were

interviewed for the first edition, and countless more for the second edition. Thus the book contains personal anecdotes from a wide variety of women in STEM careers at all career levels, ranging from academia to industry, and government, from graduate students through to university presidents.

The authors make reference to scientific papers and studies on gender issues to highlight their points. They provide a range of references to other equally useful books such as Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* (2013). However, I found some of the references to be somewhat out of date in this fast changing modern world. There is an extensive, but not exhaustive bibliography at the end of each chapter, for further reading.

Throughout the book, the authors present results from studies and a myriad of anecdotes that highlight unconscious bias, which are of course beneficial for both genders to read. However, I felt an explicit chapter on unconscious bias would be useful in the next edition. It is no secret that in Australia across the broad range of STEM subjects we train roughly equal numbers of male and female PhD students (and have done for a number of decades), but the participation of women in science decreases disproportionately at every career stage until women represent less than 20% of STEM professors at Australian universities. In mathematics in Australian universities, women make up 31% of junior academics (49 women), but only 15% of Level E professors in mathematics (22 women) (Source, Sage, Australia, <http://www.sciencegenderequity.org.au>). Identifying and naming systemic institutional unconscious biases against women in STEM is a useful step towards addressing the imbalance.

There is a chapter dedicated to balancing professional and personal life (Chapter 12), where they conclude that Women in STEM must make significant compromises if they are to achieve everything they might ideally aspire to do. They surmise that 'the key for women is to identify the compromises that they can live with, and that will lead to the highest possible level of overall life satisfaction.'



In addition they offer some very useful suggestions for organisations and how they can support women with children returning to the workforce. For me, of the strategies suggested, two resonated the most:

1. assistance with child care, including emergency child care during the day, and funds for after hours care during periods of field work or conference travel, and
2. administrative support.

The ever-increasing paperwork load for travel, hiring, field work etc. means that when working part time (e.g. on maternity leave), I spend a disproportionate number of my working hours on paperwork. Neither of these strategies are necessarily specific to women (although women may be likely to take advantage more fully), however their implementation would constitute broader recognition of the flexibility a career in STEM and academia offers and that we recognise and support people with carer's responsibilities, and who work part-time.

Chapter 13 focuses on career transitions, where contributors 'describe life stories that are profoundly influenced by their gender and the advantages and constraints of their social era'.

I felt that although interesting, the stories of these women who forged a path in STEM a generation or two ahead of me were less relevant to me. We now live in an age where women expect to have it all, and yet numbers of women at senior levels in science are not increasing, or are increasing at slow rates. What I felt was needed are stories of women who are succeeding now. Women in their 40s who have balanced work, career, tenure, family, and have survived the transition from senior lecturer to more senior academic positions.

Chapter 2 on Networking stresses the importance of both local and remote (online) networks and includes a list of (North American focused) networking websites. They also suggest Networking internally to learn the unwritten rules of your own institution. This may be overlooked in an effort to grow one's international profile.

In summary, this book is an extremely valuable reference handbook for success in modern times. I highly recommend it to anyone embarking on a career in STEM. It is useful for men and women alike and provides valuable information for all stages of the career 'jungle gym'.

Moninya Roughan

School of Mathematics and Statistics, UNSW. Email address: mroughan@unsw.edu.au

Twitter @moninya

