

## Book Review

# CLIMBING THE SPIRAL STAIRCASE HOW WOMEN CAN NAVIGATE THEIR CAREERS AND ACCELERATE SUCCESS

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Author: Leanne Meyer, the author of *Climbing the Spiral Staircase*, directs the Carnegie Mellon Women's Executive Leadership Academy. She has been an executive coach and consultant, in the field of women leadership, for over 30 years.

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**C**limbing the Spiral Staircase is focused on advice to women executives, who want to advance in their career, and desire an opportunity to join in the C Suite and on Boards of Directors. These may be women in the corporate world, or scientists that have not thought of themselves as executives yet. Certainly, a pharmaceutical or biotech company has multiple need for women in upper levels of management. Meyer gives practical advice and penetrating analysis of gender issues that are rarely acknowledged in self-help books. Her premise is that once we accept that gender makes for a different trajectory in women's careers, we can begin to plan for it, and use the bias to succeed. Meyer comes from a heritage of South African white women and views her experience as a pioneer, chartering new territory. She sees leadership as a way of living.

She establishes that the working experience for women is different from men. She uses the symbol of an M shape to describe the ups and downs, of women's career path. The book gives good advice for mid-level corporate women.

Meyer provides questions at the end of each chapter that allow the reader to self-examine their methods and passions, to be effective in their approach to career transitions and to navigate the difficulties of corporate life. These questions are helpful to the reader as they guide one to think strategically about what is next and provide practical advice to tailor careers and maximize the passions for each reader.

Meyer believes that women do not get enough feedback about how they are perceived by others. This

is preventing them from becoming leaders and keeps them stuck in being highly effective individual contributors.

According to the author, what you intend does not mean anything, if it is not how you are being perceived. Intention and perception are two vastly different things. Her advice is to take charge of your career rather than wait to be recognized and rewarded. Meyer explores the concept of *locus of control*, a psychological concept that explains whether we think we are in control of our lives, or whether we are controlled by external factors. An internal locus of control means you are likely to believe that you "make it happen" while, an external locus of control would mean you feel that "life happens to you." Meyer believes that women often tend toward external locus of control, and believe that their circumstances are controlled by others, while men are more likely to be assertive and less vulnerable to negative feedback.

Another consideration is that there are times of transitions in a woman's career, which include having a child, or taking care of an elderly parent, which must be incorporated into the entire career path. Transitions are part of the book's focus, with the pithy expression that, women often make *perfection* the enemy of the *good enough*, and thus can lose the passion that brought them to the workplace. Living in your own passion is a theme throughout the book, and that equates to knowing what is meaningful and passion-filled to the reader.

According to Meyer, relationships in your network hold the key to current and future success, so building networks of influence becomes a key to success. Networks, she believes, should be wide and

varied to cast a substantial net. Also, developing an *agenda*, or a framework within your passion, to make strategic decisions is the hallmark of a leader. Meyer believes it distinguishes a person from the average middle manager. Creating an agenda is part of the exercises in the book.

To become a leader, she believes, you must use networks to equip your team to add value, sense trends, generate breakthrough ideas and gather support, feedback, and resources to get things done. Meyer draws on other authors to back up her claims of the need for strategic networks as well as personal networks.

One of the salient points made by the author is that the choice of a life partner can impact the success or failure of a woman's career. Another point, in the discussion of culture and owning your career, finds Meyer quoting Sheryl Sandberg: "The single most important career decision a woman makes is whether she will have a life partner and who that partner is." Meyer's goal in this tough discussion is to equip the reader to advocate for herself. She finds this fundamental for success at any level.

Visionary leadership is needed more now than ever, and Meyer explores it from the context of building your career and achieving an air of executive presence. She uses examples from other authors to explain what *executive presence* means and encourages the reader to consider her own branding. By projecting calm certainty and gravitas, executive presence is assured. To be a valuable leader, Meyer says, women need strategic visioning and insight into the future. The transition from just a worker bee to being a strategic resource, connects a woman to potential significant career growth, and aids in being perceived as a leader. The author believes how you are perceived by others is a valuable tool and can be crafted by the reader. This brings the conversation back to what is important in career growth and the path to the C Suite in a gender- biased world.

The author explains that an important skill for women is to negotiate for themselves, and she asserts that there is a distinctly feminine way to do it. In the chapter on **Negotiating for Yourself**, she fine-tunes the confidence needed to harness thoughts into actions and, the reader is challenged to increase their professionalism to prove competence and to have status.

As a former biotech executive and CEO, who has grown companies through an IPO and advised women for decades in bio entrepreneurship, and also as a biotech venture capitalist, most recently focusing on female-invested and female-led biotech enterprises, I recognize firsthand the "climb" up the spiral staircase. Meyer's book does not address entrepreneurs or small

business but focuses on larger corporations with an eye toward upward mobility. She herself is a consultant, and that business requires leadership, but not in a traditional sense, as her book describes. The skills she focuses on are still relevant if you want to raise money or sit on a board.

One of the most valuable tips given in the book is to think of *team first*, and Meyer implores the reader to leave their *authentic self* in the background when speaking for a team and be a leader with a high level of confidence and optimism. Women often tend to be great individual contributors but often fail when it comes to being team leaders. This is a skill that can be taught, and Meyer does a good job. A team can be a scientific team, a venture partnership, or a sales organization. Leaders see team first and embody excellence to project a winning attitude.

The title the **Spiral Staircase** alludes to the fact that careers for women are not staircase and predictable, but slow and steady with forward momentum that incorporates the passion of the individual and her choices in life. What role the decision to have a child might play, to marry, divorce, and/or be a single parent.

It reminds me of my father's advice to me early in my life as a young scientist, lamenting my career trajectory, saying, I would not know what my career was until I was 50 years old and looked back. He was correct as the twists and turns of my career path were not predictable.

One central question for this book review remains: Is this applicable to women in the biotech industry? I would say, Yes. Any woman who is currently an executive or is a scientist or is in any number of responsible career positions in biotech can benefit. For one thing, innovation in biotech is filled with passion.

There is much in the book for everyone, such as advice on how to be a better ally, coworker, partner, and parent to women in and out of the workplace. Immersion in a field which one loves and is excited about is core to the author's message of *passion first*, and as life unfolds, watching that central theme take form in diverse ways. Meyers gives tools for transitions and makes them doable.

Men at any stage in their careers can also learn from reading this book. It is not only relevant to their own careers, but they can learn to be good allies to women and help promote diversity on their teams at the top. The leadership lessons and strategies in this book are critical to success in the workplace.

**Nola Masterson**  
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