


Review

 This unique and ambitious book is like a benevolent aunt who gives practical advice and moral support to women working in STEM, **Fiona Cobb** finds.

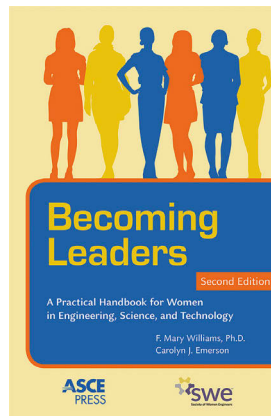
Becoming leaders: A practical handbook for women in engineering, science, and technology (2nd ed.)

Authors: F. Mary Williams and Carolyn J. Emerson

Publisher: ASCE Press

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Originally published in 2002, this updated edition of *Becoming Leaders* starts with the bold claim, 'If you think this is just another book about women's issues, think again. This one is different'. And as it was the only title covering women, leadership and STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) that I could find, that claim seems entirely reasonable!

The book is aimed at women at all levels in STEM and those who support them: including students, mature professionals and human resources (HR) teams. Rapid-fire tips and advice are spread across 20 chapters, with a 'roadmap' giving suggestions for the four to six chapters which might be most appropriate for particular reader groups: students, career women (private or public sector), faculty members, deans/heads/chairs and HR managers.

In this context, there is something for everyone, as leadership is defined by the authors as 'the ability to ask for the change you want and then help to "lead" that change'. It promises a digest of research and guidance in a compact format with 'actionable' practical advice.

The authors certainly provide a unique and ambitious range of subject matter. Whole chapters are dedicated to time management, career progress and job hunting. In addition to dealing with lack of

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role models and unconscious bias, which affect all women in STEM, the authors also touch on sensitive subjects such as how to encourage partners to carry out a fair share of domestic work and how to negotiate balance in a dual-career household.

In this respect, the book is a good reference to dip into at different times of life. Each reader will come with their own questions and challenges, and the authors have tried to cater to all. The range of topics covered is so impressively wide that there were many parts outside my experience, e.g. postgraduate studies, academic careers or media appearances. Therefore, this review is heavily swayed by my perspective as a part-time worker and mother of two.

The advice in relation to work-life balance was very sensible: park the guilt, define your balance and share the load. However, it is

perhaps worth saying that the advice in this book is just that – advice. Not all parts will suit everyone and I found the section provided for children to read difficult to confront:

– [your mother] 'is often busy with important work so she encourages you to do stuff on your own'.

– 'learn to make yourself a healthy snack if you are hungry'.

Ouch! My guilt was piqued rather than parked and I was left wondering why mainstream books on leadership don't tend to offer similar advice.

Ultimately, I also found the title of the book slightly confusing, as I generally think of leadership as something which is done with other people, while the content seemed slightly geared towards individuals. So, if there is a future edition, inclusion of gender-specific sections covering the MBA-style soft skills (such as non-verbal communication, lateral and upward influence) would be very useful.

Above all, this book's great strength is that it contains a wealth of experience and sage advice from mature women who have been there and done that. Working in STEM can sometimes feel like sailing into a strong headwind, and the advice comes across like a warm and benevolent aunt giving practical advice and moral support. So, would I buy a copy? Yes – probably not as a book about 'leadership', but it has great value as a sort of paperback mentor.



Fiona Cobb

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Fiona joined Price & Myers in 1997 as a graduate engineer, becoming an Associate in 2002. She is author of the *Structural Engineer's Pocket Book*, now in its 3rd edition having sold nearly 40 000 copies. Fiona enjoys working on small to medium-sized building projects, ideally combining modern design, conservation and environmental sustainability.