

# Success Strategies in STEM: 'See Now Your Original WOW!'

BY DR. CHRISTINE S. GRANT

**WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE PRISTINE** white snow in your life turns into gray slush? The snow looks beautiful and fresh when it first falls, then it mixes with the reality of the world; the dirt, dust, oil and grime convert it into a gray slush.

Sometimes our careers are like this: the initial excitement at the new job, a novel educational opportunity or a fresh leadership position full of possibilities can change due to circumstances beyond our control. We know there's freshness and optimism still deep inside — longing to fully manifest in our STEM careers. Successful career management requires networking and mental toughness aligned with personal style. Climbing the ladder entails a strategic balance of one's personal and professional life to avoid time stress during different career and life transitions. As we navigate our journeys individually and collectively in STEM, it is imperative that we learn to negotiate with emotional intelligence in all facets of our lives.

Mentoring relationships are critical in the development of the aforementioned skills for STEM professionals in all realms (i.e., academia, industry, government). Throughout my career, I have benefitted as a mentee and delivered benefits as a mentor in STEM. In January, as we celebrate National Mentoring Month, I challenge you to explore the "the good, the bad, the ugly and the better" aspects of your own mentoring relationships.

There are four crucial skills needed to create a strong mentoring portfolio over your STEM lifetime:

- Find a mentor
- Manage a mentor
- Transition a mentor
- Be a mentor

It's important to find compatible mentors who are sensitive to your unique job or educational situation, have the appropriate knowledge/experience, and are willing and able to participate in an informal/formal mentoring relationship with you. While there are differing views on

the usefulness of mentors who are not like you,<sup>1</sup> there's no such thing as a perfect mentor and you should not feel compelled to connect with someone in the same demographic category as you. The richness of mentors across cultures and genders enhance your mentoring portfolio, providing access to enhanced networks in your organization. Mentoring relationships can develop "naturally" or be "formally assigned" by leadership in your workplace.

In the absence of formal programs, your own initiative can lead to a diverse group of people who may coach, advocate, sponsor and advise you on both professional and personal issues. Managing your mentoring relationships requires clear communication of expectations and responsibilities of both parties built on a foundation of trust and honesty. Mentoring transitions are often challenging due to different perspectives on: (i) transitions to "equal" collegiality, (ii) redefinitions of responsibilities (i.e., new leadership roles), and (iii) the perceived "need" for the mentor's advice. Again, communication is key to working out an amicable process to move forward.

Finally, being a mentor enables you to introduce the freshness of STEM into the life of another person; compelling you to "See Now Your Original Wow" (SNOW), recalling that original freshness, empowering your future success!

*Academic Resilience Strategist, consultant and award-winning mentor, Grant co-edited "Success Strategies from Women in STEM: A Portable Mentor" (Elsevier Press). An Associate Dean of Faculty Advancement and Chemical Engineering Professor in the North Carolina State University College of Engineering, Grant consults and empowers STEM professionals in customized workshops, coaching and keynotes. Contact: drchristinegrant.com.*



<sup>1</sup>From "Success Strategies from Women in STEM: A Portable Mentor" by CS Grant and edited by Peggy Pritchard and Christine S. Grant, Academic/Elsevier Press (2015).