

LSE Lit Fest 2017 Book Review: Step Up: Confidence, Success and Your Stellar Career in 10 Minutes a Day by Phanella Mayall Fine and Alice Olins

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With **Step Up: Confidence, Success and Your Stellar Career in 10 Minutes a Day**, Phanella Mayall Fine and Alice Olins offer a new career self-help guide for women that includes 10-minute 'workout' activities designed to boost confidence in navigating the workplace and forging a career path. Combining research, real-life experience and practical advice, this accessible and relatable book is a joy to read, finds **Christine Sweeney**.

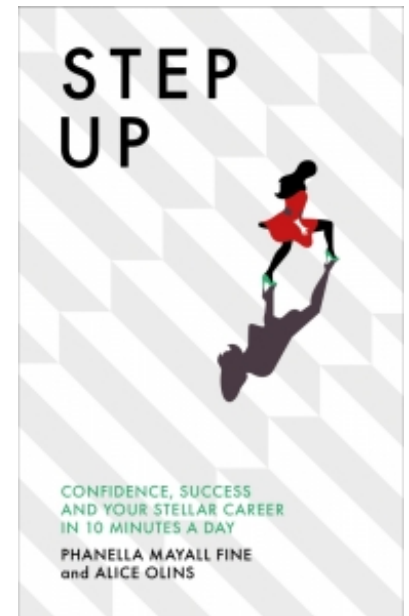
On **Tuesday 21 February 2017**, Phanella Mayall Fine and Alice Olins gave a public lecture on this book as part of the **LSE Space for Thought Literary Festival 2017**. This year's theme was **Revolutions** – not only marking the centenary of the Russian Revolution, but also other anniversaries of revolutions in literature, international relations, politics, religion and science.

Step Up: Confidence, Success and Your Stellar Career in 10 Minutes a Day. Phanella Mayall Fine and Alice Olins. Vermilion. 2016.

Find this book: 

'Act Like a Man. Look Like a Lady. Work Like a Dog,' advised my mother's 80s-era career woman mug. I saved the relic from a give-away pile and it's become a cherished part of my morning coffee routine, a reminder of 'how far we've come'. Thankfully, over the last 30 years, many barriers for women have been lifted, replaced by hard-won workplace equality rights, though far too many glass ceilings stubbornly remain. With this progress, career advice targeted towards women has evolved. *Step Up: Confidence, Success and Your Stellar Career in 10 Minutes a Day* challenges the long-held belief that women must emulate men to succeed. The book's central message is for women to pursue their own definition of success while staying 'uniquely and wonderfully female'. For authors Phanella Mayall Fine and Alice Olins, 'gender parity does not imply gender uniformity.'

Joining the revived conversation on how women can overcome the long list of historical marginalisation, self-sabotage, societal expectations and unconscious biases to achieve professional success, *Step Up* offers a practical guide to women across professions and experience. Mayall and Olins's diverse backgrounds are well-suited to provide advice to a large cross-section of women. Having worked in both legal and finance sectors, Mayall transitioned to a career in coaching and training women in large companies. Olins is a journalist who has covered a variety of topics for many of Britain's most respected newspapers and style publications. Longtime friends, the women have always taken a personal interest in discussing and sharing professional advice with other women. However, they realised there was a dearth of relevant literature that offered a combination of research, practicality, real-life experience and, most importantly, was relatable for women of diverse professional and personal backgrounds. So they decided to write their own book. Indeed, Mayall's practical, coaching tone and Olins's conversational, interesting and concise style shine through such that not only is the book an action-based career guide, but also a joy to read.



The book's ten chapters provide an overview of the many downfalls of working while female; tools for self-reflection

to define success; and tools for using self-awareness to strategise next steps, whether these be switching careers, getting a promotion or achieving a better work-life balance. From its introduction, the book adopts a tone of awareness of 'the way the world works' that aims to release women from achieving largely male-defined success in a world created by men, for men. Instead, women should aspire to success that honours their specific needs and goals, such as balance, authenticity and satisfaction, over broader achievements like wealth, status and job titles. The book provides helpful ten-minute exercises meant to easily fit in to the overworked woman's schedule, while allowing her to put advice into practice. These 'workouts' range from assembling a 'Career Vision Painting' to having a friend write your CV (the hypothesis being that our friends are more positive and expressive about our achievements than we are) to documenting how you spend every hour of the week to reassess how you balance your time.



Image Credit: Steps (Gareth Senior CC BY 2.0)

What's most refreshing about the book is its acknowledgement of the external forces that have limited women, while nonetheless empowering women to navigate these and better use their own qualities to get ahead. Mayall and Olins confront the historically male monopoly on what it means to be a leader. By articulating historically constructed gender inequalities, the book's advice prepares women to redefine workplace power dynamics.

Beyond establishing the existing barriers women face, the core of the book, covered in Chapter Two, is defining personal success: 'to be able to possess an honest and attainable vision of success, we need to be able to embrace the brilliance of what being a woman really means.' To go about reconceptualising success, Mayall and Olins use behavioural research to frame key traits in one's career: namely, challenge, balance and authenticity. Readers can then gauge how important each of these traits are and adjust career plans accordingly. This self-assessment can further be defined through core values: 'research tells us that if we align our work values with our personal ones, we are more likely to feel fulfilled.'

Here, like in many of the other chapters, the authors offer examples of real-life women who illustrate unique examples of success: Karren Brady is the highly competitive 'Climber'; Marie Curie is the 'Expert', valuing achievement over status or pay; Margaret Thatcher, driven by a degree of organisational influence, is the 'Influencer'; and JK Rowling is the 'Self-Improver', 'motivated and inspired by realizing her potential'. To consider values and define personal success, the chapter also provides five ten-minute 'workouts' specifically dedicated to self-reflection, career assessment and clearly envisioning a successful future self.

Chapter Four covers confidence and confronts many of the unhelpful, and often inaccurate and self-sabotaging, perceptions women develop of themselves. Confidence matters because ‘when you do not believe that you are important and worthy, you marginalize your success’. The chapter disabuses women of the idea that confidence is a personality trait that some people have and others do not. Instead, confidence is a choice and it is also ‘cumulative,’ as one business-owner featured in the book observes. Part of being confident is being able to own and defend one’s opinions. One of the chapter’s ‘workouts’, ‘Dare to Disagree’, challenges readers to strike up a conversation and take a stance on an issue and defend it, rather than seeking to agree with the other person. The chapter closes with framing confidence as a powerful and self-perpetuating cycle: the more you do (rather than talking yourself out of something), the more you achieve and the more confident you feel. It seems simple, but the reminder is valuable.

On 21 February 2017, Mayall and Olins discussed *Step Up* as part of the annual [LSE Literary Festival](#), which this year focused on the theme of ‘Revolutions’. Seeing them share their stories live was like seeing a well-done film based on a book. Their discussion of friendship, failure and success demonstrated the authenticity of their work. Like the book, the talk even featured a ‘workout’ where audience members were encouraged to introduce themselves to strangers and swap contact information: a reference to the book’s networking chapter. Whether you are just beginning your career, are looking to shift fields or are in a rut, *Step Up* is worth a read, not only for career advice but also life skills – as Olins noted at the LSE event: ‘it’s simple information, but we need to know it.’

Christine Sweeney is a master’s student in LSE’s Department of Media & Communications. Before arriving at LSE, she worked in international development and tech policy. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Latin American Studies from Tulane University. Her current research focuses on gender representation in the media.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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