Every Other Thursday

Stories and Strategies from Successful Women Scientists

Ellen Daniell
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To Group — Christine, Beth, Helen, Mimi, Suzanne, Judith, and Carol — the heart, soul, and cast of characters of this book.

And to my mother, Winifred Marvin Daniell, whose love and support in all my endeavors have been the greatest constant in my life.
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If I’m not busy every second of every day, it seems that I’m not working hard enough.

Maybe having a fulfilling personal life is incompatible with a successful career.

I feel like I’m an emotional cafeteria, responding to what others want.

I feel responsible for everything but have no power to change anything.

These perceptions come from members of a problem-solving group that aims to empower professionals by providing practical and emotional support. Having been a member of this group for more than twenty-five years, I have written this book to encour-
age others to try a group approach in countering stress and isolation in professional life. Discussions with people in diverse careers have convinced me that many of the fears, concerns, and strategies of our group are widely applicable; I have set out to share them in these pages. In addition to examples and illustrations, I have included practical guidelines.

The objective of Group, as we call it, is cooperation in the competitive world. Group members seek both practical solutions for specific problems (such as dealing with a difficult boss or employee) and broader perspective on our lives. Group helps counter the all-too-common experience of professional life as a combat zone in which nobody seems to be on your side. (The phrase “swimming with sharks” is often used to describe life in the business, legal, and academic worlds.) Anyone who feels isolated in a professional or competitive setting or who wants honest feedback can benefit from a group, a safe testing ground where everyone is on your side. A critical message of this book is that intimacy and reliance on others for encouragement and advice is a source of empowerment, not a sign of weakness.

Every Other Thursday is based on the professional experiences of seven women. Although most of them work in an academic environment and began their careers twenty-five to thirty years ago, their messages remain relevant. The struggle to achieve gender and racial equality, for example, is an ongoing concern in academic and business settings. I do not attempt an in-depth ex-
ploration of this issue, but the Introduction summarizes extensive data that demonstrate its immediacy.

This book is not only for women. Men who have read it have urged me to promote its message to males as well. The point is that men or women who find themselves part of a minority in any professional setting share many of the psychological and emotional challenges described here. Group problem solving is valuable in facing a variety of challenges—from embarking on a new career to dealing with conflict to preparing for retirement.

The process I describe is not about getting advice on how to behave, manage one’s time, or be a good boss; rather, it is about support, discussion, and practical application of common experience to individual problems. The group approach derives its strength from numbers, because of both the diversity of feedback and the experience of sharing others’ problems.

This is neither a memoir nor a history of our group. The story of my own life as a scientist, professor, businessperson, and writer exemplifies how Group works: its members helped me navigate a major career setback and then identify and pursue my professional dreams. The lives of other members are seen through their work in Group meetings.

Our years of discussion in Group have revealed a number of themes, which include recognizing personal achievements and taking credit for them; finding balance in managing busy lives;
and making choices with a belief in our right to make them. One chapter addresses the rewards and complexities of relationships among women in the workplace. Others deal with specific professional challenges such as writing, public speaking, and institutional politics. Issues of particular concern to women (but relevant to men as well) include the need to acknowledge and honor their feelings and the struggle to incorporate our families and careers in one life. Part 3 details the rules and procedures of our group, explains why we found them important, and provides guidelines for readers interested in starting a group. The Further Reading section lists works on groups and group therapy for those who wish to pursue the topic.

In this book I encourage the reader to look to others for support in professional and personal endeavors. I have witnessed women successfully help one another work through dilemmas and celebrate accomplishments through the dynamics of group interaction. This book is about the power of not trying to go it alone.
Every Other Thursday focuses on women scientists who created an association to help one another through the complexities and stresses of their competitive careers. In the 1970s, when the group started, choosing such a career frequently meant being the first or only woman in a department or research organization. Today, as the numbers of women in science and engineering have increased, such extreme isolation and obvious groundbreaking is less likely. Are the struggles of these women and the lessons they learned therefore only of historical interest today? The answer is an unequivocal no, for several reasons. First, analysis of the numbers of women advancing to top levels in their careers shows that a gender differential persists. In-depth studies on career progression and the environment women experience in the work-
place demonstrate that very real barriers remain. Furthermore, it is clear that members of racial and ethnic minorities share many of the effects of isolation that women have experienced and with which they still struggle.

Despite progress toward equity, important disparities still exist. Although this volume attempts neither to be an authoritative source of data nor to determine causes of discrimination and underrepresentation of women in science, key studies provide a current context for the message of this book.

A primary source of the power of the group process is that groups bring together people with shared concerns who might otherwise be isolated from one another. Data on the representation of women illustrate this point. (The numbers for other minorities are still more striking.) In 1999, women earned 36 percent of doctoral degrees granted in science and engineering (up from 8 percent in 1973). Yet only 26 percent of employed doctoral scientists and engineers were women. Of those employed in four-year colleges and universities, 29 percent of the doctoral scientists and engineers were women. Within academia, the percentages decrease when tenured or full professors are considered and when the most prestigious research institutions are examined. A publication entitled “A National Analysis of Diversity in Science and Engineering Faculties at Research Universities” looks at the representation of women in fifty top research universities.¹ The authors discovered that 7.6 percent of full profes-
sors in chemistry and 14.8 percent in biological sciences were women. The numbers were even lower for mathematics, physics, and all branches of engineering. In sociology and psychology, the fields having the highest percentage of women faculty, there was still a striking contrast between assistant professors (52 and 45 percent, respectively) and full professors (14 percent in both fields). Abigail Stewart, project director at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at the University of Michigan, has pointed out that “many smart motivated women have cited isolation and marginalization as reasons for moving out of science and engineering at major research institutions.” To extend the point to fields outside academia, it is interesting to note that as of 2001 only four of the CEOs of Fortune 500 companies were women.2

That women have lagged behind men in their representation in the science and engineering workforce is of much concern to organizations that seek to foster scientific achievement. In researching the issue, I discovered that the situation is worse than I had imagined.

The administration and faculty at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) performed the first and most famous in-depth study on the status of women faculty within a particular institution. A group of senior women on the faculty had gathered preliminary evidence that they had less laboratory space, less access to research funding, and lower salaries than their male counter-
parts. In addition, they were infrequently represented on committees that made decisions about hiring and research funding. MIT’s administration responded by researching the charges, finding that they were accurate, and taking steps to correct the inequities. The abstract to their report is an excellent description of the issues that still confront women scientists and analysis of why they went unrecognized by administration as well as by the women themselves.\(^3\)

In 1995 the Dean of Science established a Committee to analyze the status of women faculty in the six departments in the School of Science. The Committee submitted a report of its findings in August 1996 and amended reports in 1997 and 1998. The Committee discovered that junior women faculty feel well supported within their departments and most do not believe that gender bias will impact their careers. Junior women faculty believe, however, that family-work conflicts may impact their careers differently from those of their male colleagues. In contrast to junior women, many tenured women faculty feel marginalized and excluded from a significant role in their departments. Marginalization increases as women progress through their careers at MIT. Examination of data revealed that marginalization was often accompanied by differences in salary, space, awards, resources, and response to outside
offers between men and women faculty with women receiving less despite professional accomplishments equal to those of their male colleagues. An important finding was that this pattern repeats itself in successive generations of women faculty. The Committee found that, as of 1994, the percent of women faculty in the School of Science (8%) had not changed significantly for at least 10 and probably 20 years. The Committee made recommendations for improving the status of senior women faculty, addressing the family-work conflict for junior women faculty, and increasing the number of women faculty. The Dean of Science took immediate actions to effect change and these have already resulted in highly significant progress including an increase in the number of women faculty. This collaboration of faculty and administration could serve as a model for increasing the participation of women, and also of under-represented minorities, on the faculty of other Schools at MIT. This is an important initiative since, even with continued effort of this magnitude, the inclusion of substantial numbers of women on the Science and Engineering faculties of MIT will probably not occur during the professional lives of our current undergraduate students. The inclusion of significant numbers of minority faculty will lag for even longer because of the additional problem of a shortage of minority students in the pipeline.