



Lessons from Women Leading Science

by [Elizabeth Weingartner](#) · December 7, 2015

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Being fearful is not a trait I immediately associate with successful people. On December 3rd, however, when Stephanie and I attended a panel discussion titled “[Lessons from Women Leading Science](#),” every single woman on the panel told stories of at least three times in their careers that they were scared. Most of them used the word “terrified” to describe how they felt when they applied for or accepted the positions that made them leaders in science. **Conversely, when asked to describe a time they experienced failure,** the consensus was, **it’s all about perception.** They tackled topics on mentorship, failure, family, fear, sexism and pursuing the career you want.

So what do [Yazmine Belkaid PhD](#), [Claire Fraiser PhD](#), [Redonda Miller MD, MBA](#), and [Cristina Rondinone PhD](#) all have in common? **They all “faked it to make it” – faked being fearless and confident that is.** Well that, and they are some of **Maryland’s most successful female scientists** who spoke at “The Evolution of Success”, organized and executed by the MidAtlantic chapter of the Healthcare Businesswomen’s Association (HBA). The audience was on the edge of their seats while listening to the breathtakingly candid stories told by these inspiring women.

On Being Afraid:

The discussion started with each panelist telling a story about a time they were fearful, an exercise that made these rather intimidating women become instantly more relatable. In fact, **there were more moments than not when their advice was so relatable that I felt they must have been speaking to me personally.**

Belkaid related a story of being afraid to pursue a career as an independent investigator after her post-doc. Due to a lack of female role models and the lack of mentorship in her department; she chose instead to remain a staff scientist. She remembered a chance encounter with an investigator who listened to her research presentation. He was astounded that she wasn’t pursuing an academic position as a principal investigator. His demeanor shook her, and she realized she had been afraid to reach for more –to pursue the career she deserved.

Fraiser related a story about being afraid to fight an administration that was discriminating against women achieving tenure. She discussed being afraid to take the position of president and director of The Institute for Genomic Research (TIGR). Without experience in running a research institution, she feared being unprepared and under-skilled –yet she was also afraid of someone else being brought in who might take the institute in a different direction, so she said she took the position with fear that she couldn’t do it, and because of fear that someone else wouldn’t do it right. She ended her talk with a quote from The Wizard of Oz, where the good witch says to Dorothy, “You had the power my dear, you just had to learn how to use it.”

On Finding a Mentor:

One of the most relevant themes they discussed was that of mentorship, and the “Cinderella Syndrome” a lot of young scientists experience. The main symptom of this syndrome is expecting the perfect mentor to appear at midnight and offer you all the advice and guidance you will ever need. Alternatively, Belkaid said that a mentor-mentee relationship should be just that: **a relationship. One based on “mutual respect”.**

All the panelists agreed that, when looking for a mentor, don’t walk into the office of an esteemed scientist and say, “will you be my mentor?” There is a good chance they don’t know who you are. Instead, **develop relationships with the esteemed colleagues** you think might be a good mentor. Get to know them as people, and don’t seek one all-encompassing mentor.

Of course, this task seems daunting so you might be asking, how do I get to know these super successful and therefore, very busy potential mentors? Rondinone suggests we **ask questions, offer feedback, and be active at lab meetings, seminars**, etc. She offered a story about someone who she worked with, who she “didn’t even know existed”, until one meeting when he started to ask insightful questions.

On Pursuing the Career You Want:

In fact, the **act of asking** was a theme in the panel discussion. Miller pointed out that it is a mistake to think that people will know your worth right out of the gate – **“you will have to prove yourself and then the rest will follow.”** She suggested, and Rondinone echoed that **we should ask for the opportunities we want.** For instance, Miller’s background was in medicine but she was interested in the economics of healthcare so, after working for her MBA, she asked her boss for the opportunity to use that skill set and complete a project that interested her. Fast forward a few years and she is the Vice President of Medical Affairs, a position that allows her to use both her medical and business backgrounds.

On Dealing with Failure:

As Stephanie pointed out [in a recent blog post](#), science makes it easy to feel like a failure on almost a daily basis. However, when the panel was asked to share a story about a time they felt they had failed, Fraiser surprised the audience: **“I’m racking my brain trying to think if a time I failed, and it’s not because I’m so successful that I’ve never failed. I could flip things around in my head to come up with a long list of failures. But I don’t look at them that way. I remember them as learning experiences.”** She shared an encounter she had with two principle investigators, a man and woman, who had both applied for RO1 and been rejected. The woman blamed the rejection on herself, citing she had been mentally preoccupied with a pregnancy. Alternatively, the man blamed the reviewers. **“It’s all about how you perceive it,”** she said.

On ‘Having it All’:

Of course, in a panel discussion of how these women became successful, the topics of how to maintain a “work life balance” and “having it all” (marriage, children and a career) were discussed. All the panelists agreed that having a companion or partner who was supportive was critical. Fraiser cited a [piece in The Atlantic by Anne Marie Slaughter](#) to point out that **“women can have it all, but don’t set yourself up to fail by expecting it all in the beginning. You may need to pursue your career at your own pace in order to fit in time for your family as well.”** Miller built on this idea by sharing how she makes decisions about work life balance by thinking about her priorities. If she pays for someone to clean their house once a week, that gives her more time for her family and work. She also downloads all her kids big events onto her calendar so she can schedule all work events around them. She contributes to a work culture that encourages both men and women to feel like they can adjust their schedules around their families.

On Responding to Sexism:

The parallel subject of responding to sexism in the workplace was also discussed. Again Fraiser offered insight, reminding us that, **for the culture to change, women have to be willing to overcome fear and step up for the jobs that cause “gut wrenching fear”.** She pointed out that men too feel pressure to conform to unrealistic ideologies and we need to be sensitive to that.

An audience member asked the panel how they respond to subtle sexist comments when one might be torn between wanting to call out that behavior, versus the risk of being labeled ‘overly sensitive.’ Belkaid had the perfect response. She suggested that sometimes **humor** is the best way to shrug off the little jibes, telling a story of attending prominent scientific meetings and being asked “So Yasmine, who is taking care of the kids?” She simply responded, “Oh, I put food on the floor and they’re just fine.”

Stephanie and I agreed this event was one of the best career advice workshops we have ever attended, and we would encourage anyone to consider attending in the future. We would like to especially thank the sponsors, MedImmune, Astra Zeneca and the Graduate Women in Science Omicron Chapter for covering the cost of registration to make this event free to students and trainees.