

# Working Together **BUT APART**

BY LIZ DOLAN

**Five sisters. Three cities. Two continents. One radio show. The Satellite Sisters weigh in on working together and what makes their relationship work.**

Want to know what it's like when five real-life sisters get together to do a live Saturday morning radio show? Here's one example:

My phone rings. I roll over to look at the clock. 5:30 a.m. Slowly gaining consciousness I pick it up.

It's my sister Sheila, frantic.

"Liz, where are you? We're late! Why didn't you pick me up?"

I panic. How could my alarm not have gone off? I normally leave my apartment at 4:40 a.m. to pick up Sheila a few blocks away to arrive at KABC by 5 a.m. to be live on the air at 6 a.m.

I leap out of bed, telling her I am on my way. Then, suddenly, it dawns on me.

"Sheila, it's Friday."

Long silence on the other end.

Oh. Sorry, Liz. I'll call you later."

Okay. That's not a normal day. It only happened once, but it could only happen with a sister. On a normal day, when Sheila

and I arrive at KABC in Los Angeles at 5 a.m., our sister Lian is there putting her contacts in. She swears it makes her funnier, but she can't do it until she's at the studio. While Sheila goes off to make the coffee, we hook up to our sister Monica at KXL Radio in Portland, Ore., and our sister Julie in Moscow. Our early morning is Julie's early evening, so by then she's full of information we have missed during the night.

Five sisters. Three cities. Two continents. One radio show. We dreamed it up six years ago during a sisters-only weekend in the mud baths of Calistoga. (We have three brothers, too.) We asked ourselves why there wasn't more women's talk radio. Women actually enjoy talking to each other. We use conversation to make friends

and make decisions and make each other laugh. We discuss war and peace and what to wear to an ex-boyfriend's wedding. Why didn't we hear that on the radio? Where were the smart, funny women like the women we knew in real life? Why was there so much television for women and so little talk radio for the same audience? The more we talked about it, the more worked up we got. By the end of the weekend, we decided we'd just have to create the radio we craved ourselves.

## **Special Challenges, Benefits**

Working with your sisters poses many special challenges. Luckily, we didn't consider any of them. We just forged ahead naively. We knew being sisters also had many benefits, and we chose to focus on those.

We had no actual talents in the way of singing, dancing or crafting, but we did have 40 or so years of experience talking to each other. Forty years times five sisters equals 200 sister-years. Imagine the bad



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The Satellite Sisters have learned that with the proper attitude, you can get along with anyone at work — even your sibs.

haircuts, failed academic efforts and loser food service jobs in 200 sister/years. Name one other broadcast team that can name every dorky boyfriend that any other member of the team ever had. There's no substitute for that kind of history.

We knew exactly what we wanted to accomplish, even if we weren't quite sure how. The worst work situations are those where people do not agree on the goal. We never had that problem. We knew we wanted to present not "a woman's point of view" but five women's points of view. Does anyone still believe there is one official female take on things? We knew we wanted to cover the range of topics from Iraq to rock and roll that any dinner among friends would cover. We knew family values exist in more than one place on the political spectrum, and we wanted to hear that better represented on the air. We knew we would discuss news stories, from Martha to Kobe to new hormone replacement therapy research, in a way that would just sound different than what we heard on talk radio

because we were different and our lives were different. We knew radio was the perfect place to capture this. We also knew that if it didn't work, we'd still be sisters.

We work together by ourselves. A key to our collaboration is that we all live and work in different places. Some might see this as a hardship, but think about it. Civility breaks down in most normal workplaces over issues like who didn't replace the toner in the copier or start the next pot of coffee. We have no such issues. If we worked together in the same office every day, I have little doubt that Sheila would sooner or later end up with all of our favorite sweaters.

Our mother strictly enforced a no whining rule when we were kids, and it still applies. Normal co-workers feel like they need to listen to each other's gripes about cubicle life or what a jerk the boss is. Not so with sisters. Julie could complain to Sheila that her office/broadcast studio is a tiny closet in her Moscow apartment that's also stuffed with sporting equipment and

out-of-season holiday decorations, but, frankly, Sheila doesn't care. Sheila's entire workspace is a rickety, poorly assembled IKEA armoire in the corner of her studio apartment that holds her laptop and a printer that works only sporadically. No one complains about the boss because they don't want to be the boss. Julie's the one sister with an MBA, but by moving to a foreign country right when we launched Satellite Sisters, she managed to dodge all bill-paying responsibilities. Lian ended up managing shipping and receiving (mainly filling T-shirt orders) because she had spare crawl space behind her bathroom for inventory storage. I manage all the money even though I am notorious in the family for having my utilities turned off for non-payment. Apparently, the fact that during a previous chapter in my career I ran marketing at Nike convinced my sisters that I must know how to run something even if I could not run my own life.

We have experience neutralizing combustible human resource situations. In a

normal work environment, petty differences can escalate into full-scale wars between, say, programming and sales. We knew that in a small sister-run business we could not allow this to happen. As kids, we'd seen how quickly peace can slip away. Once, during a family car trip to Washington D.C., in the summer of '69, trouble broke out between Monica and Sheila. Julie stepped in and brokered a critical Middle Seat Peace Plan that involved putting herself in a DMZ between the two. She did this at great personal sacrifice to herself, as it meant that she would be sitting on the hump the whole way.

It is critical for someone to don the peacekeeper's blue helmet when the situation gets too heated. As adults running our own Mudbath Productions now, we also

recognize that some conflicts can only be settled by outside diplomatic geniuses such as your Richard Holbrooke's or your Kofi Annan's. In our case, it is our executive producer Corny Koehl. She moves things forward even when the situation can only be described as Balkanized.

### Go With Your Strengths

We accept each other's strengths and weaknesses. Growing up in a big family we learned that no one child is ever going to qualify for "best all-around." Instead, we carefully developed specialties. Lian played the vibes, Julie excelled at drama and wore clogs. Monica landed the most lucrative baby-sitting gigs. I read a lot. Sheila smoked behind the garage. When we began doing Satellite Sisters together, we quickly figured

out that a division of labor would play to our strengths and hide some obvious weaknesses. For instance, earlier this year Lian turned to me after a segment about Fourth of July celebrations around the country and said, "Liz, don't do folksy. You can't handle folksy. You stick to the hard news, and leave the homespun to me." Frankly, I was relieved. She was right. Would I have felt the same if someone other than my sister had said that to me?

We also gave Sheila a special assignment. As the middle sister, she has long felt that she does not get the attention she deserves. She likes to talk about herself and to be asked about herself, so interviewing others does not come naturally. Why make her? Sheila's now our entertainment reporter and has no problem filling 10 minute segments with her reasoning on why "What About Bob?" is one of greatest films of our age.

Sheila and Monica both continue to work full time jobs Monday through Friday. Sheila is a first-grade teacher. Monica is a cardiac care nurse and clinical researcher. As far as we are concerned that makes Monica our medical expert on everything from the latest Alzheimer's research to why second-hand snoring can be deadly. Our policy is that she knows more than the rest of us on this medical stuff, so she's in charge. I know she worries about overstepping the limits of her medical training, so we remind listeners: We are not experts. We're just sisters.

Julie is our foreign correspondent with a specialty on every country outside the United States and Tony Blair, her favorite person on the world scene. We also turn to her on anything having to do with raising teenagers, because she can still get choked up talking about her son's high school graduation six years ago. Lian, as the mother of two young boys, covers the homework crisis in America and recently did her own investigative report into the bogus trend that was not sweeping the nation no matter what other shows said: aerobic stripping. Over the years we have worked it out so people can have as much fun as possible on the air. More workplaces could benefit from this simple lesson: Don't make people do what they are bad at.

### Making Time Count

Our situation may be more spread out than some, but even "typical" offices these days

## The Sisters' Rules for a Happy Workplace

### Julie's Rule: Someday the pork chop will be yours.

In a big family, the second helping is not always possible. A spare pork chop simply does not divide easily into eight. Julie learned that sooner or later her turn would come. She wishes more people realized this in the workplace. Life's not fair. Quit complaining.

### Liz's Rule: Get over yourself.

Liz found out at a young age that the world is a big place and she was not at its center. This happened when her parents admitted to her when she was 11 that they'd been celebrating her birthday on the wrong day for the first decade of her life. Oops.



### Sheila's Rule: William H. Macy should not do nude scenes.

Sheila loves William H. Macy. She really does. But in his latest movie he is nude a lot. This is just wrong. Stick with your strengths, she says. It's a good lesson for all.

### Monica's Rule: Naughty Panty Night can be an excellent team-building event.

Working the night shift in an intensive care unit in New Orleans requires the crew to go to unusual lengths to stay awake and motivated. Monica's co-workers included all types from grandmothers to transvestites. Naughty Panty Night always beat out Hawaiian Shirt Night and Yankee Baseball Cap night for participation. It may not be perfect for all work environments, but the basic idea is good.

### Lian's Rule: Carry Your Own Skis.

Our mother had one hard and fast rule. You could only go skiing with the family if you could carry all your own equipment to the lodge in the morning and (the hard part) back to the car at night. Lian believes that non-ski-carriers are obvious in the workplace. They arrive late, with their assignments undone and ask to borrow her pen.

are forced to work around telecommuters, business travel and other out-of-the-office working situations. Being spread out means we have to make our limited work time together count. The big event is a Thursday night conference call that requires all sisters on hand with our executive producer. It's the one time each week we all talk. It's dinnertime in the western United States and early morning in Russia. Lian's kids are getting ready for bed, and Monica is usually just getting home from work. These calls used to be awful, way too long, totally disorganized and inconclusive. Julie fell asleep once. She swears the phone company cut her off because they couldn't believe an international call could go that long, but we don't buy that.

After several years, we've learned that everyone has to be good to go exactly on time, and we need to be done in an hour. We've also learned to bust "surfer voice," the distracted "uh, huh" sound of a sister who pretends to be listening but is clearly reading her e-mail or planning her next

vacation online. I have also heard some chopping and sautéing going in on the background. I think it's Sheila.

Someday everyone will have a phone with a mute button they know how to use, but until then our lives unfold in the background either quietly or noisily while we talk and laugh and decide which issues of the week have moved us most. We work hard to balance the light-hearted stuff with news stories we believe deserve a broader perspective. After Kobe Bryant's indictment, we were shocked how many people on talk radio just assumed the accuser was lying, and we said so. When his lawyer bashed the accuser repeatedly in court, we talked about the impact it might have on other victims, the majority in fact, who never come forward to report their rapes. This is stuff women talk about in private but don't often get to say out loud to a wide audience.

In the years we've been working on Satellite Sisters, I'd say that both our personal and our professional relationships have changed – in a good way. Unlike most fam-

ily situations where everyone is forever who they were at 14, it's helpful to see that your sisters have picked up some actual skills since you used to walk to the school bus together. Lian always says that deciding to create a women's talk radio show together was as far-fetched as saying we'd build a spacecraft and fly to Mars together. It's had its ups-and-downs, but frankly, for all the pitfalls of doing this with my sisters, I can't imagine that it would be possible for anyone but sisters. 🎙️

*Liz Dolan, the second oldest Satellite Sister, says her sisters often say she is in charge but not in control. Satellite Sisters is a weekly radio show nationally syndicated by the ABC Radio Networks, as well as a bi-monthly column in "O, The Oprah Magazine" and a book titled "Satellite Sisters UnCommon Senses" from Riverhead Books. Prior to creating Satellite Sisters with her sisters, she was vice president of global marketing at Nike. She can be reached at lizdolan@mudbathproductions.com.*