

How to Run a Business With Your Spouse (Especially When You're the Boss)

There are more family-owned businesses in America than you may think—the U.S. Census Bureau says 90% of all businesses in North America are family firms. And many of those companies are in the construction industry.

And while current statistics are difficult to track down, an estimated three million small U.S. businesses are owned by married couples, according to the Harvard Business Review. In addition, there's been an increase in the number of women running family businesses—up 37% in recent years.

While being the boss of a family firm is good news for women in general, if your husband also works at the company—it can cause a strain on your marriage.

How can you best navigate running a growing business with your spouse while maintaining your personal relationship? Here are some tips

Teamwork. Think of yourself as a team. You and your spouse (and any other family members who work in the business) need to define and delineate your job responsibilities—and be specific. Try not to encroach on each other's territory. If it's possible, don't be in the position of telling your spouse what to do. In other words, while you're the boss of the business, try not to be the boss of him.

Nellie Akalp, CEO of CorpNet, a business she runs with Phil (he's the CFO), her husband of 23 years, says they run their business with "a separation of powers," but in the end, we're always unified.

Get help. Don't be afraid to admit you need help navigating these waters. Whether you seek help from a consultant, therapist, coach, or mentor, it helps, says Akalp, to go to a third party to get unbiased advice. You have to "put your egos aside, she says, and decide what's going to be best for the company.



Keep business and home lives separate. This is easy to say but hard to do. If possible, when you leave the office, leave the business talk there. If that's not possible, create a "safety zone," set aside a predetermined time to talk about business issues once you get home. The idea is not to let your business dominate your home life.

Create boundaries. Akalp advises, "While it's impossible to draw a line between work and home, we impose boundaries about what we discuss at home, in bed, or during family time."

Communication is key. Writing in Roofing Contractor, a few years ago, Monroe Porter advised couples in business, "Discuss business issues in a management-type meeting...Companies have sales and production meetings all the time. Being married doesn't eliminate the need for good, formal business communication."

And an article in Inc.com noted, It's essential to focus "on the issue at hand, not taking criticism personally, etc. Entrepreneurial couples have to recognize that business disagreements have nothing to do with their love relationship."



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You are not joined at the hip. This advice is critical when a woman runs a business in a male-dominated industry. You need to establish your authority, and tag-teaming with your husband is not necessarily the best way to do that when calling on clients or talking to suppliers.

At the office, it's also important to show some independence. One entrepreneurial couple swears by rarely eating lunch together—unless it's a business lunch. Depending on your office setup, if you have the space, putting a little distance between you helps. Akalp admits, "To keep our marriage alive, we now work in separate areas of the house."

Too much togetherness can also be a drag on your personal relationship. Carve out some time to be by yourself, or hang with your friends and leave your spouse at home.

R.E.S.P.E.C.T Being respectful of one another is key to succeeding in business and life. That means, as angry as you may get, never argue in front of clients, suppliers, or your employees. Argue in private.

This doesn't mean you shouldn't fight. As Akalp says, "You're going to argue. But If you express your needs and come from a place of love, you'll be fine." Remember, stay calm and keep your eye on the prize—building a successful business.

Put your marriage first. Don't let the business dominate your lives. Have a weekly date night. Go on short getaways (it's often difficult for married business partners to take long vacations together unless you've got trusted employees who can run the business while you are both gone).



Understand the challenge. Running a business is stressful. Running a business with your spouse ups the pressure. And having the woman be the boss can heighten the tension even more. Whether it's fair or not, experts say it takes a secure man to be a partner in a business where his wife is the boss.

But as long as you understand the challenges, communicate clearly—and often, and take the time to work on your marriage as well as your business, you're more likely to succeed at both.



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