
Intimate Leadership: The Power within Business Couples

By Miriam Hawley and Jeffrey McIntyre

"I could never work with my husband, we would kill each other!" said a businesswoman at a gathering of entrepreneurs where we described our book project about business couples. While many of us are content to work with a wide variety of people, the concept of working with one's life partner can seem strange. But over the last 30 years there has been an emergence of a new work pattern: couples engaging in both life and work together. Kathy Marshack best described this when she wrote, "Entrepreneurial couples represent the dynamic interplay of the dialogue of love and work," in her book *Entrepreneurial Couples: Making It Work at Work and at Home* (Palo Alto, CA: Davies-Black Publishing, 1998).

There are three distinct types of business couples: **co-preneurial** (*couples partnering in self-employment ventures*), **co-executive** (*executive couples who own or work with different companies*), and **co-professional** (*professional couples in the same or different professions who own their own practices*). Such entrepreneurial couples have a long history. Through the 18th and 19th centuries, many American farms, ranches, small shops and even actuarial-type financial firms were built and run by couples. Even so, hard data on the emergence of the business couple trend is difficult to locate. Businesses frequently list only one owner, though both partners operate the business. Other couples are reluctant to disclose that they are the same sex or unmarried.

There are many reasons couples choose to go into business together. Corporate bureaucracy, downsizing and outsourcing have motivated people to design more satisfying ways of working. In 2004, we began to interview business couples with identifiable strengths relevant for all entrepreneurs. As a result of their strengths, they developed additional capabilities as they faced the challenges, failures and successes in both their intimate and business lives. One seemingly ordinary factor is how much the couples enjoy being together. Overall, the couples are successfully running one or more businesses, have an intimate relationship, are raising a family and participating in their communities. They share such common issues as: "When do you think we'll be able to draw a salary," and "Who is picking up the kids?"

For couples engaged in businesses, the line between work and home can be thin. So why do couples create businesses together at all? The husband of one co-professional couple explained it this way: "We often joke that in our courting we had virtually nothing in common. We didn't come to appreciate until much later that our fascination with businesses is something we absolutely share. We conduct business differently, but we just love talking about it."

Another co-executive couple said their businesses are successful because they are each other's best advisors and they keep their relationship center stage. A woman who has always worked for herself said, "One of the key factors in this relationship from the very beginning has been a commitment to communication which is allowed to be completely authentic."

In our research, we have identified five key factors that have enabled these couples to succeed:

1. Friendship as the Base

All of the couples are one another's best friends. They chose to be in business together so they can spend time together. A man who had worked 20-plus years for a multinational corporation said the relationship was most important to him. "Our overall vision for ourselves is not business. It's been partnership." A woman expressed this sentiment: "We are really good friends. I believe that is the foundation for everything for my husband and me."

2. Essential Communication and Conflict Management

Connected closely to friendship is solid communication. One man said, "It's all about communication, including handling the differences and conflicts. If you communicate, you can solve anything." Many of the couples talk all the time and most enjoy fluid boundaries between their personal and business conversations.

Several communication patterns stand out. The first involves long car drives, as a haven from distractions, for planning and generating new ideas. Most couples do not discuss work in the bedroom. One woman said that if she and her husband have a disagreement that ends up in a fight as they drive to work, they have an agreement to stop the moment they enter the store. At the end of the day the disagreement is *either* irrelevant or a priority to resolve. All couples agreed that conflict resolution demands the best of each other.

3. Defining Flexible Roles

Just as we stretch our bodies to be successful athletes, successful business couples have to be flexible to achieve their goals. The couples spend time clarifying their roles and expectations. They pride themselves on having organizational and gender-role flexibility. For example, in one couple the woman handled employee relations; in another, it was the man. A third couple worked as a team. The larger the business, the greater the role complexity and definition must be. In one such business the husband handles the COO function and the wife handles the human resources and CFO responsibilities. In another partnership, one woman defined herself as "the engine" and the other as "the visionary," each role encompassing their strengths.

4. Passion and Work Ethic

Closely connected to friendship and communication are passion for business and a supportive work ethic. Many couples are entrepreneurs who have failed and succeeded in various businesses. One couple thought about being in business since childhood. The wife jumped at the opportunity to go into business after her husband's layoff. For them it was the right time and their marketing and design skills meshed well. Owners of an established business said that their now young adult children speak of the business as "our number one child." Their commitment to being financially successful kept them refining goals and business plans, choosing to work long hours, taking few vacations and even changing businesses until they were satisfied with their success. It is important to note that, as committed as couples are to their businesses, they are equally devoted to their immediate and extended families.

5. Customer and Community Service

While all the couples are obviously in business to make money, they are also powerfully engaged in offering excellent customer service and contributing to their local and global communities. Contribution is an essential part of their vision. One woman running a business in a major metropolitan area for at-risk families said, "We're so committed for these young people in high-risk families to develop, to come out of their victim-hood and be responsible. Yes, that's like perfect service." Another entrepreneur said, "[Our] mission is to serve humanity, and machining our product is in the service of that mission. By serving humanity we will be number one in our business."

Our experience in conducting these interviews has been that no matter who the couple is, what their age or background is or what business they are in, they demonstrate a level of partnership that goes beyond the meeting of their immediate family needs. They are providing a service in a variety of critical areas: customers, community, and, most importantly, relationship.

Most business models are grounded in competition and fear of loss. One of the biggest challenges is in the way people experience these forces that can drive business and family life. What these successful business couples offer is intimate leadership, where the power comes from the core of the relationship. The ability to integrate, balance, and simultaneously pay attention to the relationship and business are essential. The relationship itself then fuels the fires of creativity, profitability and success.

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