

Office Politics  
Couples Working Together In Business

By Zelda Greenberg

When Bob and his wife Prudence decided to start a business together, they jumped right in. They thought it would be fun to work together so they just did it. Unfortunately, this kind of strategy, and lack of planning, can cause a couple to kill their romance or even end their relationship.

Bob was on the road working a large territory for corporate America for many years. With a hectic schedule, he flew home on weekends. Prudence was home raising the children. She handled all the responsibilities of educating and raising a happy, well-adjusted, healthy family. Prudence also managed their personal matters, including the finances and schedule.

While on the road, Bob—not the type to spend his downtime in a bar—sought neighborhood bookstores to spend his free time. He called home frequently and, during one of these phone calls, became

alarmed. While speaking to his daughter, she asked, “Are you my phone dad or are you my real dad?” That was the moment Bob decided his road warrior days were over.

Soon afterward, Bob and Prudence purchased a bookstore franchise. The problem they ran into was the same one that many couples realize when opening a shared business. While many couples understand how to manufacture or sell their product or service, few have the necessary skills to run a successful business. To be successful, you have to do more than just place an “Open” sign in the window.

With 80 percent of businesses being family owned, many couples desire to work together, even when it means overcoming various obstacles and challenges that face business owners. So, if you’re already in business together, what can you do to improve your company, both financially and emotionally? How can married couples and families thrive in business together?

**Goal Setting.** Every business should have a written business plan. In the beginning, it might be only a couple of pages. A business plan is always a work in progress. You’ll continue to tweak the plan as the company grows, but there are basic items it must convey to avoid future conflict. First, state your overall goals, both short- and long-term.

Ask each other how you plan to let customers know you’re open. What will you do to advertise and market your goods or services? These are two more basic elements. The plan should also cover all the responsibilities necessary for success. It should also describe who’s in charge of each responsibility, including sales, marketing, expenditures and finances. Then it’s time to determine a budget. Discuss how much money you’ll need to accomplish all the plan’s goals.

Responsibilities. Your business plan should clearly state the different responsibilities needed to run your business. Together, you should determine who is best to accomplish each responsibility. Is your spouse better at finance and numbers? Let the stronger one be in charge of fiscal responsibilities. The spouse who is in charge of the financials should also be responsible for government reporting and all functions relating to accounting. Who will handle sales and customer service? Once a job function is designated, respect him or her to make the right decisions. As the company continues on, make sure the appropriate person continues to handle his or her responsibilities. Check back with one another on a regular basis.

Communicate effectively. Everyone has a different style of hearing and learning. Listen to how you speak to one another. Some people hear what you say but need a little time to process it. Learn how each other hears and be patient. Whenever you have a disagreement, never voice those concerns in front of others. Nobody likes being told what to do by his or her spouse. Avoid acting or appearing as if you're the boss of the other. Let each person state his or her opinion and, if necessary, go back to the written business plan as a reference guide.

Drop egos at the front door. There's no room for power plays in a family run business or office. You must create and maintain a harmonious environment for yourself and your staff members, even if it's just the two of you. Your harmony together (or lack thereof) can make a huge difference in sales, customer service and productivity. You must be united in your efforts to succeed. Customers, employees, vendors and suppliers must see you working together. A bickering couple creates tension and makes the entire environment toxic.

Hold regular meetings. If you aren't doing this already, it's a great idea is to schedule weekly or even daily meetings. They should be held at the business location, not your home. This is the time to discuss expenses, profit and loss statements, goals, problems you have and those you may encounter. All communication should be constructive and in line with carrying out the business goals.

Trust your board of advisors. Creating an outside board of advisors is wonderful for finding solutions. Differences can be settled with the use of an advisory panel. It should be comprised of trusted people with varied expertise. It can also be a wonderful sounding board for any issues or challenges your business might face. You can meet as a group, quarterly (for example), or one-on-one as necessary. A good mix would include a CPA, an attorney, a banker, a marketing expert and someone retired from your industry.

Check with your chamber of commerce to see what programs it may have to help businesses grow. Many have formal groups that meet and act as advisors. There are also private companies such as TEC that have programs designed specifically for executives to get together in non-competing industries. Formal or informal, it doesn't matter how you get together; what's essential is that you have a group of professionals or trusted friends who will provide honest feedback.

Remember: At the end of the day, you're going home together. Try to keep things in perspective and leave the shoptalk where it belongs. To survive in today's competitive marketplace, you must be able to

successfully conquer a work-life balance. When you maintain balance, you can have a successful and happy business and marriage.

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