

Should You Fire Your Spouse?

My hat is off to any couple that can live and work together in a business. This is truly a test to their commitment to each other and to the business they operate and control.

Should couples work together in business? Only those involved can answer that question. Business and private lives, responsibilities and obligations are always as different as the individuals and working styles of each person. Working and living together could create conflicts which impact the relationship and potentially the company's profits, not to mention the added stress it could bring to any staff involved in the crossfire.

Deciding to work together initially could be a way to spend more time together and to offer support to each other, not only as life partners but as working partners. They feel they know each other's strengths and weaknesses and together, no one else, in their opinion, can offer the same commitment and dedication. This commitment allows them to develop the business together.

For many, working together is natural; they can live and adjust to the workplace challenges with ease, but statistically, less than 10% of couples can make a business relationship work or survive in a co-ownership situation.

It is important to recognize what each spouse brings to the table, acknowledging and more importantly, agreeing with these strengths and weaknesses upfront. In theory, the strengths of the individuals will complement each other to the benefit of the business. Unfortunately, common sense will often lose out to their emotional commitment and there are often too many management differences and styles which will create conflict. Having awareness in advance can save a lot of aggravation but if a couple is determined to make it work, they both need to find their fit within the company and assign specific responsibilities and rules to follow, ultimately agreeing and allowing one of the two to take ownership for any and all final decisions, right or wrong.

Staff needs have to be considered. Not so much in long established businesses with dual spousal controls, but more so when a spouse joins either an established or new business. Inevitably, new rules will be implemented as the newly minted "spousal" employee takes their rightful position. No doubt, some of these actions/rules will be treated negatively by the employees who may resent the additional boss, impact on morale and ultimately on performance and results.

In a normal business structure, employees would have a conventional flow of command in which direction, complaints, issues and concerns can be tabled and discussed and there are no emotional ties.

In a spousal management system, the employees will often be reluctant to state their position for fear of making waves or alienating themselves in the working environment, creating unnecessary tension and resentment. In the end, the employee will most likely feel quite awkward and, if a challenge is boldly tabled, more often than not, the other spouse will have no alternative but to work as a management team and support the other's direction whether its the correct decision or not. If they fail to work and support each other and counter or challenge each other's controls, the employees could seize the opportunity to

their benefit. Right or wrong, the management has the final word and as a team the spousal managers will need to step up and support each other often to the displeasure of the employees and leave any discussion for later and more importantly, leave discussions for behind closed doors and definitely not in front of the employees.

A final point to ponder is: if working together is being considered, remember to consider the challenges that can result from working all day, every day together. From the drive to work, to the drive home, every day, evening and weekend, there will be a heavy focus on the commitment to the business with little time available to consider your lives together as a family. It inevitably will become all about the business which can be overwhelming and all consuming. Personally, I have seen the consequences of this in many businesses; some that survived and many that didn't and why didn't they survive? Because the couples lived, breathed, talked and thought only about the business and in the end, the relationships suffered, got stale and they ended up hating themselves and the very business which they thought would bring them so much joy and reward.

So should you fire your spouse? This is a choice you need to make. If it will save your relationship, then yes, if it will benefit the business and staff, well maybe, but in the end it is your choice. For the record: you need to take care of your health first, without good health your family and also the business that supports your lifestyle will suffer. Your family is then a very close second as nothing else matters and your business is third. So please see if you can both follow these three basic principals; if not, it is time to have a good positive discussion about what is most important in your lives and business and working arrangements.

Bottom line, do what is right for your relationship first, as this will impact you and the business for some time.

Editor's Addition, An example of how one couple makes it work...

Karen Waters and her husband Joey Lang became business partners almost two years ago when they launched a custom countertop business, Akribela Surfacing Inc., in Duncan, BC. The choice to run a business together was a natural one due to their complimentary skills: Waters handles all the business dealings, while Lang designs and fabricates the high-end custom countertops. Each has very distinct responsibilities, so one of their biggest challenges is keeping each other constantly up to date.

"Most often, when we have a disagreement, either we haven't properly communicated with each other or we've had an issue with a supplier or a customer," says Waters. "Just because I've said something, doesn't mean that Joey's heard it, understood it and will remember it!" As Akribela continues to grow, Waters and Lang are establishing more formal protocols to minimize any miscommunications they might have.

Waters also mentions that it's important they each have separate interests outside the business to keep things balanced: Lang is a volunteer firefighter and Waters is a musician. "Being involved in other things enables us to socialize with other people and have interesting things to discuss with each other that don't involve Akribela," says Waters. "We also guard our Sundays as we know that it's very important to have at least one day off per week. It's in that 'time off' that we can tap into the more creative part of ourselves, where ideas are generated and where inspiration comes from."

Despite the challenges they sometimes face in working together, Waters and her husband share a vision for the business and have a very solid partnership. “We have a common goal and we’re able to enjoy new experiences, meet new people, and rise to new challenges as a couple. We are also able to ‘brainstorm’ together to find solutions to issues. Two heads are better than one!”

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