

FAMILY BUSINESS FORUM

Couples Who Work Together

By Donald Levitt

The Issue

It is often said that “opposites attract” – a predictable person falls for someone who is spontaneous, while the spontaneous person find their partner’s predictability quite reassuring.

Let’s fast-forward a few years. Now, “spontaneity” feels like a lack of planning, and “predictability” seems pretty boring.

This is all very normal. Talking about mutual expectations and feelings – and not expecting your partner to change who they are – are ways to strengthen the relationship.

But what about when these partners work together? How do they avoid driving each other crazy? Let’s find out.

The Expert

Debbe Skutch is the Director of the University of Toledo’s Center for Family Business. The Center for Family Business is one of the oldest and largest centers for family business in the country. It consists of over 130 family businesses in Northwest Ohio and Southeast Michigan. Through educational forums and confidential discussion groups the Center helps its members to develop “best practices” in running a family-owned business.

The Center recently held its first meeting for their “Couples Who Work Together” initiative. “Many of the couples we met with fit the ‘opposites attract’ model, and the differences seem to run along gender lines,” says Skutch. “The men come up with new ideas and the women focus on actually getting things done. The men also are inclined to control issues and keep information to themselves while the women share information. Each wants to be appreciated for their own contribution, and tends to minimize the other’s contribution.”

“These roles may arise if the man is already in the business and the woman then joins to fulfill a specific role such as bookkeeping or marketing,” says Skutch. “If the woman already owns the business and the man then joins, these roles may be different.”

The Family Business

Peggy and Malcolm Richards are the founders of Supplemental Staffing. Their business offers temporary staffing, direct placement, contract staffing, and related services out of

offices in Toledo and Bowling Green, Ohio. They started working together in 1974 when Malcolm asked Peggy to help him with a previous company which he owned.

“We started out with each of us playing every role,” says Malcolm. “We both saw clients and provided services. If someone had to go into the office in the middle of the night, one of us would go and the other would baby-sit.”

Over time their roles became more specific, with Malcolm focusing on sales and Peggy on accounting.

“Our decision-making styles are quite different,” says Peggy. “I like to gather lots of information for a decision and Malcolm prefers to just decide. We’ve had a lot of ‘passionate’ discussions – not yelling and screaming, but close to that.”

“We decided that we needed one final decision-maker,” notes Peggy, “but the other has the right to quit. Malcolm makes decisions in sales and I make decisions in operations. If one of us is out of the office and a decision needs to be made, the one in the office makes the decision.” Malcolm goes on to observe, “This is why Peggy never leaves the office!”

Peggy and Malcolm’s roles have changed over the years. “I was a workaholic and Peggy had great family values,” says Malcolm. “We morphed into opposites. I realized that I was missing the family side so I spent more time with our kids. Peggy used this as an opportunity to spend more time at work.”

There have been significant business setbacks and challenges along the way, but “We’ve always been able to laugh,” says Malcolm. “We’ve had the blessing of having different and complementary strengths. I could see what we needed to do and Peggy could get us there.”

The Tip

Couples who work together should anticipate being “opposites.” Rather than being frustrated with differing styles, appreciating the other’s strengths and capitalizing on the differences can make for a stronger team – and a stronger relationship.

Donald Levitt, president of Levitt Consulting, helps family businesses to succeed as both a business and a family. More information about this month’s topic, and other family business issues, can be found at LevittConsulting.com