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COUPLES LEARN HOW TO BE ROMANTIC AND BUSINESS PARTNERS



By: Joyce Rosenberg - February 13, 2019

NEW YORK (AP) — Debbie and Gary Douglas sometimes need to remind each other, this is your business partner talking.

In business together for 16 years, the Douglasses have found that being co-owners of a public relations firm requires them to be more direct with each other than they once were as spouses. Like the time Debbie Douglas was on a ladder in their Newport Beach, California, home and her husband told her to come down because she might break an ankle.

"I said, 'don't worry about it.' He said, 'this is your partner speaking, you have a trade show to do next week and you can't do it with a broken ankle!'" says Debbie Douglas, co-owner of Douglas Strategic Communications.

Romantic partners who are also business partners can find there's a lot of tough talk, listening, learning and compromising needed as they run a company, a personal relationship and often a family. Couples may have unique struggles depending on their personalities and the type of business they own. But there are common hotspots: Roles and responsibilities that aren't well defined, vastly different styles of communication or decision-making and sometimes a clash of egos.

While the Douglasses know how to take a hard line with one another, they also know when to budge.

"You yield to the other person if they are more qualified to make a decision," Gary Douglas says. "You can't have your own way every day, every time."

Ben Taylor and his wife Louise learned that lesson the hard way.

"At the end of the first work day, my wife burst into tears and said, 'I want to tell my husband how horrible my new boss is!'" Ben Taylor recalls. The problem was that the husband, who owned a technology consultancy, needed his wife's help but wasn't spelling out her

role; he'd never really thought it through. Like many entrepreneurs, he also found it hard to relinquish some tasks.

"I know I'm a bit of a control freak. It just didn't jell — we just got irritated with each other," says Ben Taylor, who also owns Homeworkingclub.com, an advice website for freelance workers based in Kent, England.

The business partnership started in 2006 and failed in just a year. But the couple tried it again in 2013, this time with each of them handling specific responsibilities. She is a writer. He does the consulting and administrative tasks.

"My wife would far rather be free to do work for her clients — essentially working in the business while I'm working on the business," Ben Taylor says.

Spouses who co-own companies say friction, while unpleasant in the moment, ultimately helps them strengthen their relationships.

"We have learned to get through disagreements the old-fashioned way — through arguing and eventually coming to a compromise that one or both of us are happy with," says Clinton Smith, who owns the retirement planning firm Government & Civil Employee Services with his husband, Galen Bargerstock.

The couple founded the business in 2010, five years into their relationship. At first, it was rocky. Smith remembers the fights they had over who should be doing what. But the company, based in Indiana, Pennsylvania, thrived, and "this was when we knew no matter what, we had to keep working hard," Smith says.

They learned how to divide responsibilities according to each partner's strengths; Bargerstock handles sales and Smith manages marketing.

"We have grown both as a business, but also as a couple," Smith says.

Some couples go for help — not to a therapist, but a business coach. That's how Wendy and Scott Schultz reconciled their differing styles that, as Wendy Schultz put it, turned decision-making into a battlefield.

Galen Bargerstock and Clinton Smith of Government & Civil Employee Services, LLC (GCES), are focused on navigating federal and state employees through financial and retirement planning. Both hold a Pennsylvania Life, Health and Annuity License. Bargerstock is also Series 6 and 63 licensed.

To contact GCES, please call 800-985-3272 or visit gces.us.

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"I would see an opportunity to expand our business in the form of a new investment and would want to act quickly. He would see all of the reasons the investment could go wrong and wanted to take time to assess all the pros and cons," says Wendy Schultz, CEO of The Simple Life Hospitality. The Green Bay, Wisconsin-based company invests in and manages vacation rental properties; Schultz founded it in 2013 and her husband joined her in 2016.

There was also tension between the couple over who was in charge, and the fact that running a business isn't a 9-to-5 occupation, like the job Scott Schultz previously worked at. They began working with a coach to understand and change their dynamics.

"There wasn't a defining moment where we resolved our differences, but over time, we've found ways to make our styles complementary for the success of our business," Wendy Schultz says. "Through our own trial and error, we've developed a happy medium."

Sometimes, working well together takes brutal honesty. Cynthia Smoot remembers struggling with her husband Randy for several years after she joined his advertising agency, Gangway Advertising, in 2008. They had an ongoing clash of egos and a hard time accepting each other's point of view. She remembers one argument during which he was pretty blunt.

"You want to do your own thing? What do you think you're bringing to the table?" Cynthia Smoot recalls her husband saying. "Some things that I thought were strengths, he saw as weakness. That was an eye-opening exercise."

Part of the problem was too much closeness — being together 24/7 didn't work. So, they transitioned from sharing a home office to two separate rooms in different parts of their house in Dallas.

"I was as far away as I could get from him," Cynthia says. "I told him, 'don't even come walking in here. Google-chat me!'"

Now, she says, they share harmony and a successful company.

